THE GEITHNER-SUMMERS PSYCHODRAMA
Noam Scheiber

HEALTH CARE REFORM FOR DUMMIES
Jonathan Cohn

THE BAGGY GREATNESS *of* ROBERTO BOLAÑO
William Deresiewicz

MY E-MAIL *from the* PRESIDENT
Leon Wieseltier

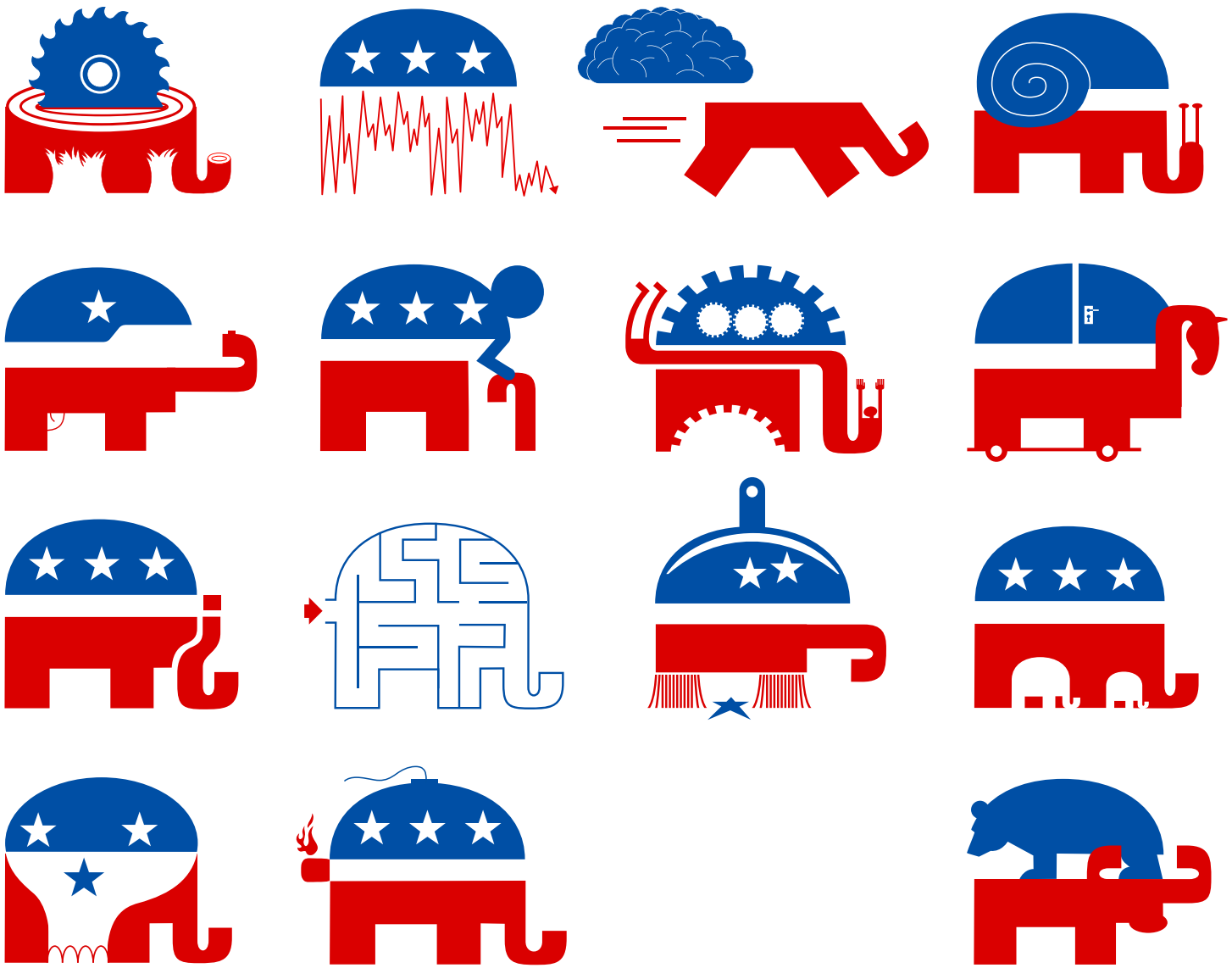

# The New REPUBLIC

FEBRUARY 18, 2009 • $4.95


## Conservatism Is Dead

An Intellectual Autopsy of the Movement

Sam Tanenhaus




LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# Americans may eventually find a way to live without oil. Water is another story.

Optimistic Americans believe we will eventually replace our dependence on oil with alternative fuels. There is no alternative for water. It is the one resource that humans can't live without for more than a few days. Yet many experts see water shortages as a looming crisis of massive proportions. Evidence abounds. Robert M. Hirsch of the U.S. Geological Survey reports some parts of the country are now depleting water that has been around since the ice age. California water officials say population growth is outrunning water supply and that the state will be short on water by 2020. Every newcomer to California adds 140 gallons of water demand per day. El Paso, San Antonio and Albuquerque could run out of water by 2020. Central Florida could run out of water in five years. In Kansas, the high plains aquifer will be used up within twenty-five years. And upstate New York's reservoirs are at record lows. A water shortage will make an oil shortage seem trivial. What can we do to head off a water crisis? The first step is limiting waste, especially in irrigation. The second is limiting demand by managing a population explosion driven almost totally by immigration. If we can all agree on an immigration plan that is fair and workable, we can avoid the projected growth of another 100 million people in just 30 years*. If we don't, the demand for fresh, clean water will continue unabated. Until the tap runs dry.

**America's Leadership Team for Long Range Population-Immigration-Resource Planning**

***300 million people today, 400 million in just 30 years. Think about it.***

| American Immigration Control Foundation | Californians for Population Stabilization | Federation for American Immigration Reform | NumbersUSA | Social Contract Press |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **www.aicfoundation.com** | **www.capsweb.org** | **www.fairus.org** | **www.numbersusa.org** | **www.thesocialcontract.com** |

*Based on 2008 census projections.

Paid for by America's Leadership Team for Long Range Population-Immigration-Resource Planning

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# THE NEW REPUBLIC

*A Journal of Politics and the Arts*

VOLUME 240 WASHINGTON, FEBRUARY 18, 2009 NUMBER 4,853


# The N-Word

In the brief weeks that Barack Obama has been president, the n-word has been heard with startling frequency in Washington. We're talking about "nationalization," of course. The plight of the country's banks has become so severe that the GOP's incessant cries of "socialism" during last year's campaign, so ridiculous then, suddenly seem too mild a description for the prospect we face. After all, nationalization sounds less like something Sweden would do and more like an order Hugo Chávez might issue during a rant against capitalism.

And yet Sweden did nationalize its banks, and we may have to as well—at least temporarily. Midway through Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner's confirmation hearings last week, Chuck Schumer let loose with a startling revelation about the size of the hole in the banking industry: "I did a little calling this weekend to people who would know, and they said it could be three trillion dollars, four trillion dollars." Wall Street's senior senator then added: "I mean it just shakes our financial system, something that large."

He ain't kiddin'. For all the debate around it, the trillion-dollar stimulus bill currently winding its way through Congress is mostly a stopgap measure to prevent the current recession from becoming an outright depression. For growth to be self-sustaining, entrepreneurs must have access to start-up capital and established businesses need credit to cover operating costs and fund expansion. Unfortunately, none of this is possible when the banking system is broken; lenders sitting on piles of losses are loath to extend credit. Which is why the only question among economists is who will pay to clean up this mess, covering those losses so that credit can begin flowing once more.

Schumer's observation came in the context of a discussion about a so-called good bank/bad bank proposal. The idea is that the government would pay private banks $3 to $4 trillion to take their bad debt off their hands, then park it in a government-owned entity (the so-called "bad bank") in hopes of selling it off when its value improved. In the meantime, the banking industry would see its capital base replenished and could resume the business of lending. (This was the original idea behind the $700 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program, before the Bush administration abruptly changed course and began simply handing out cash.)

Alternatively, the government could seize—i.e., nationalize—the troubled banks, taking control of both bad assets and good ones. Once again, the rot would be cleaned out and housed in a separate entity, with the hopes of recouping its value later on. Before that, the government would pump up the banks with the necessary capital, then sell them back to the private sector. In this case, the bank's owners—that is, its shareholders—would see their stakes wiped out. But their contribution, in the form of the banks' remaining assets, would defray the cost of nursing the financial system to health.

There are, to be sure, practical objections to nationalization. For one thing, who would actually manage the banks once the government owned them? (Geithner and Larry Summers, the top White House economic aide, are both said to be discouraged by this problem.) And, absent clear conditions under which the Feds would take over any given bank, nationalization could easily provoke a panicked stock sell-off across the financial sector, as investors worried their bank might be next. Re-privatization alone poses huge logistical challenges (who's eligible to buy, and at what prices?).

But, while thorny, these issues aren't insurmountable. For example, an honest accounting of assets across the entire banking system would shine light on far more bad debt than we're currently aware of. But it would also reveal which banks are relatively healthy, reassuring investors that they're not nationalization candidates. In any case, the bad-bank alternative is far *less* workable—it would require a far bigger outlay, money the government doesn't currently have. That means issuing more debt and risking a collapse in the dollar and a devastating spike in interest rates. What's more, the banks were the ones whose disastrous foray into the mortgage market created the financial crisis in the first place. Taxpayers should not have to fork over several trillion dollars simply to make their shareholders whole, as they would under the bad-bank option.

The worst course of action is the one we've taken up until now, gradually escalating capital injections and loan guarantees, preventing the banks from collapsing outright, but doing little to reinvigorate them. The Japanese spent the 1990s enacting similar half-measures, which spared them short-term political pain but cost them a decade of growth. And, in the end, they had to bite the bullet and administer the shock therapy anyway. Admittedly, "nationalization" is an ugly word, but it's a lot prettier than the alternatives. ◆

*Edel Rodriguez*



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# Spare the Rod

*In defense of Blagojevich (kind of).*

JONATHAN CHAIT

I FULLY REALIZE that few complaints are more tiresome than "your party's scandal is worse than my party's scandal." But indulge me for a moment. I can't think of a good reason why Rod Blagojevich has become the most hated man in America while Norm Coleman still walks the streets with his head held high.

What, you say—Norm Coleman? Yes, Norm Coleman! Let me explain. The soon-to-be-former senator's scandal is pretty simple. Nasser Kazeminy, a wealthy businessman and close Coleman friend, allegedly paid him $75,000 under the table.

And by "allegedly," I mean "almost certainly." Here's how the almost certainly true alleged scheme worked. The payments to Coleman came in the form of what Tony Soprano would call a "no-show job." One of Kazeminy's companies is called Deep Marine Technology. Kazeminy allegedly ordered Deep Marine's CEO, Paul McKim, to make a series of $25,000 payments that would go to Coleman's wife. According to McKim, Kazeminy was utterly blatant. He said the reason for the payments was that Coleman needed the money and McKim should disguise them as a legitimate business transaction.

The intermediary they picked was an insurance company owned by Jim Hays, a major Coleman donor who had given contracting work to Coleman's wife, Laurie. Hays admits getting the $75,000, according to the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, but says he "provide[d] insurance advice" to Deep Marine and denies the money went to Laurie Coleman.

This is very hard to believe. Deep Marine was already paying $1 million per year for insurance from a London company that specializes in underwater offshore lines, which is Deep Marine's business. And Laurie Coleman, who had only recently become a licensed insurance rep after a career as a model and actress, "can't legally write insurance policies because she has no association or 'appointment' with an insurer," the paper reported. It's possible Laurie Coleman never got the money from Hays, or got it but never informed her husband. But keep in mind that Kazeminy is, by Coleman's own account, a longtime, "very dear" friend. It's hard to imagine him working with Laurie behind Norm's back, or not confirming that his gift was received by its intended recipient.

McKim (a Republican) grudgingly agreed to the first three payments but quit rather than make the fourth, and he is now suing Kazeminy, as is a group of Deep Marine shareholders. The FBI is reportedly investigating as well.

If you're inclined to think that maybe Coleman has simply been victimized by a bizarre series of coincidences, it's worth keeping some recent history in mind. Coleman has also been embroiled in a minor scandal in which he rented a Capitol Hill apartment from a Republican lobbyist for the preposterously low sum of $600 a month. He has also let Kazeminy fly him on his private jet to locales like Paris and the Bahamas and, reportedly, buy him expensive suits. So the latest scandal wouldn't exactly fly in the face of everything we know about Coleman.

Of course, Coleman has not yet been proven to have committed a crime. But the same can be said of a certain floppy-haired former Illinois governor whose guilt has nevertheless been universally assumed. The comparison between Coleman and Blagojevich is instructive because the allegations entail the same basic crime, which is to leverage political power for personal gain.

Some differences in the scale of relative guilt do present themselves. In Coleman's defense, he's currently just a subject of an FBI investigation, while Blagojevich has been voted out of office. And, of course, Coleman hasn't been caught boasting about his scheme. On the other hand, Coleman is accused by a Houston businessman of having actually *accepted* illicit funds, while Blagojevich is merely being accused of harboring an *intention* to sell his Senate seat.

Now consider how the two stories have fared in the national press. Blagojevich has turned into the biggest crime story since O.J. Simpson. Can you guess how many articles about the Coleman scandal have appeared in the national media? One short wire story. When I bring up Coleman's scandals with my colleagues, many of whom follow politics for a living, invariably they have little or no idea what I'm talking about.

I confess that, by comparing Coleman with Blagojevich, I've stacked the deck a bit. *Any* political scandal is going to appear underplayed next to Blagojevich's. What propelled Blagojevich into a pop-culture phenomenon was, first, that he was caught on tape making the sorts of crude calculations that no doubt go on behind closed doors in Washington and state capitols every day. Then Patrick Fitzgerald, a telegenic and already famous prosecutor, denounced Blagojevich in the most florid terms ("cynical," "appalling," "a new low," etc.). While Illinois rules against jury-tainting forbid prosecutors from making such statements, the effect of Fitzgerald's blatant misconduct was to further lower public esteem of the accused rather than the accuser.

But, of course, this is just my point: These scandals are as much a function of perception and mass psychology as anything to do with the underlying merits. Coleman benefited from his race against Al Franken, whose very candidacy struck many people as a joke (unfairly, I think). Coleman, a pro-Bush Republican running in a blue state, based his campaign on Franken's characterological unfitness for office and managed to acquire the trappings of the good-government candidate.

None of these factors, however, make the disparate treatment of Blagojevich and Coleman any less bizarre. Blagojevich's fellow Democrats have treated him like a war criminal. Not only did they rush to pronounce him guilty, they fought tooth and nail to deny a Senate seat to his appointee Roland Burris, without requiring even the whiff of wrongdoing on Burris's part.

Meanwhile, Senate Republicans are staunchly defending Coleman's hopeless legal challenge to overturn Franken's victory. Last week, the Republican Jewish Coalition hired Coleman as a spokesman. The RJC announced, "we are eager for him to travel across the country on our behalf and to be an important voice within the organization." Republicans aren't just defending Coleman, they're going out of their way to keep him in the public eye! Do they even realize this man is being investigated by the FBI? ◆

## TRB
### *From Washington*



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# Contents

## February 18, 2009


*The Editors* **1** **THE N-WORD** *The financial-sector fix that dare not speak its name.*

### *TRB*

*Jonathan Chait* **2** **SPARE THE ROD** *In defense of Blagojevich (kind of).*

### *THE MALL*

*Noam Scheiber* **5** *Geithner-Summers psychodrama, Round 1.*

*Barron YoungSmith* **6** *David Frum breaks ranks over cocktails.*

*Eve Fairbanks* **9** *The lefty hot spot in Obama's Washington.*

*Jason Zengerle* **10** *The inaugural-ticket victims who won't go quietly.*

### *FEATURES*

*Sam Tanenhaus* **12** **CONSERVATISM IS DEAD** *An intellectual autopsy of the movement.*

*Jonathan Cohn* **18** **THIS WON'T HURT A BIT** *Health care reform for dummies.*

*James Kirchick* **23** ***PRAVDA* ON THE POTOMAC**
*Russian propaganda descends on Washington.*

### *BOOKS AND THE ARTS*

*Stanley Kauffmann* **26** **FILMS** **HEROES AND PEOPLE**
*A safe haven in Belarus; an ode to Liverpool.*

*Sarah Williams Goldhagen* **27** **ARCHITECTURE** **STICK STUCK** *The case for prefabricated architecture.*

*Mary Jo Bang* **28** **POEM** **D IS DYING, AS ONE GOING IN THE DARK**

*Jed Perl* **32** **ART** **THE SPIRITUAL IN ART** *No longer scorned as merely religious, Marc Chagall and Georges Rouault are Modernist masters once again.*

*William Deresiewicz* **38** **BOOKS** **LAST EVENINGS ON EARTH** ***2666*** *by Roberto Bolaño, translated by Natasha Wimmer*

*Judith Harris* **42** **POEM** **REGRESS**

*Helen Vendler* **44** **BOOKS** **A NEW HEAD** ***TYRANNOSAURUS REX VERSUS THE CORDUROY KID*** *by Simon Armitage*

### *WASHINGTON DIARIST*

*Leon Wieseltier* **48** **NETWORK NATION**


**COVER ICONS BY FELIX SOCKWELL AND THOMAS FUCHS FROM THEIR SELF-PUBLISHED BOOK *GOP 100*, AVAILABLE AT GOP100.COM**


ADVERTISING SALES & MARKETING: (212) 588-9200

AD MANAGER EAST COAST *Tom Buttrick, x1325* | PRINT AD MANAGER WEST COAST *Bob Washburn, x1205*
ONLINE AD MANAGER MIDWEST *Paula Kapacinskas, x1103* | ONLINE AD MANAGER WEST COAST *Shannon McAndrews, x1338* | MARKETING DIRECTOR *June Lough, x1337*
AD ASSISTANT *Lauren Sims (lsims@tnr.com)* | ONLINE AD COORDINATOR *Katrina Galsim (kgalsim@tnr.com)*

**THE NEW REPUBLIC (ISSN 0028-6583), Vol. 240, Number 2, Issue 4,853, February 18, 2009.** (Printed in the United States on January 30, 2009.) Published bi-weekly (except for skipped publication dates of April 29 and December 16, 2009) at 1331 H Street, NW, Suite 700, Washington, D.C. 20005. Telephone (202) 508-4444. For advertising inquiries, please contact Lauren Sims at (202) 508-4444. Yearly subscriptions, $79.97; foreign, $119.97 (U.S. funds); Canada, $99.97 (U.S. funds). Back issues, $8.00 domestic and $10.00 foreign/Canada (includes postage & handling).


© 2009 by The New Republic, LLC.


Periodicals postage paid at Washington, D.C., and additional mailing offices. Rights and permissions: fax (202) 628-9383. Indexed in Readers' Guide, Media Review Digest. For hard copy reprints, call (202) 508-4444. Microform, Canadian Periodical Index, and CD-ROM are available through ProQuest, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Telephone (800) 521-0600. Postmaster: Send changes of address to The New Republic, P.O. Box 420235, Palm Coast, FL 32142-0235. Member, BPA Worldwide. Send letters and unsolicited manuscripts to letters@tnr.com. Poetry submissions must be e-mailed to poetry@tnr.com. **For subscription inquiries or problems call (800) 827-1289 or visit our website at www.tnr.com.**





LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# THE NEW REPUBLIC

Inaugural Event Spotlight

A Concert
*featuring*
The Silk Road Ensemble with Yo-Yo Ma

Sidney Harman Hall
January 17, 2009

**ATTENDEES INCLUDED**

Tina Brown, *The Daily Beast* • Jo Cooper, Toyota Motor North America, Inc. Stephanie Cutter, Department of Treasury • Tom DePonty, AREVA • Gloria Dittus, Dittus Communications • Rahm Emanuel, Chief of Staff to the President Peter Fenn, Fenn Communications Group • Suzanne Folsom, AIG Representative Barney Frank • Representative Jane Harman and Sidney Harman • Walter Isaacson, the Aspen Institute • Afghan Ambassador Said Tayeb Jawad • Senator John Kerry James Lentz, Toyota Motor North America, Inc. • Senator Joe Lieberman Stuart Levey, Department of Treasury • Bill Novelli, AARP • Dian Ogilvie, Toyota Motor North America, Inc. • Peter Orszag, Office of Management and Budget Moshe Safdie, Moshe Safdie and Associates • Kuwaiti Ambassador Salem Al-Sabah British Ambassador Sir Nigel Elton Sheinwald • Larry Summers, National Economic Council • Representative Henry Waxman

SPONSORS | PhRMA | nextbook a new read on Jewish culture |
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

## Border War

*Geithner-Summers psychodrama, Round 1.*

Larry Summers has a cutting sense of humor. For example, when he thinks a proposal calls for government heavy-handedness, he will dismiss it as "Putinesque," a reference to the statist Russian leader. So maybe it's fitting that some of Summers's administration colleagues view the intellectually fierce former Harvard president, now head of the National Economic Council, in similar terms. As a handful of administration insiders have told me, more in playfulness than bitterness, Summers has the strongman's appetite for expanding his turf, plucking far-flung policy portfolios—health care, energy—and claiming them as his own.

Among other things, this impression of Summers has shaped the coverage of his relationship with Tim Geithner, his one-time protégé. When Geithner's nomination to be Treasury secretary foundered amid revelations of unpaid back taxes, it was Summers who, according to the narrative, rushed into the vacuum. "Summers outshines Geithner," announced an article in *Politico*, citing "concerns about whether [Summers] and Geithner . . . can effectively co-exist in a relationship where the softer-spoken Geithner would be expected to take the starring turn."

It's easy to see how these concerns might arise. Geithner drifted into semi-isolation after his tax scandal broke, disappearing from meetings and conference calls just as Team Obama was finalizing its stimulus and bank-bailout plans. It was Summers who often dominated internal discussions, pleaded the administration's case on Capitol Hill, and wooed key constituencies like labor and Wall Street. Students of Obama's economic team wondered if Geithner could make up the lost ground.

But there's a way in which the accepted storyline both overstates Summers's imperial ambitions and understates Geithner's savvy. The truth is that Geithner isn't getting elbowed aside by anyone. His bureaucratic mettle is such that he's actually shored up turf amid the recent distractions.

It's only natural that a man who was hailed as one of his generation's great academic minds by age 30 and who'd become Treasury secretary by 45 would have strong opinions on a thick menu of issues. Or, for that matter, that he'd have an urge to share them. In the years before he joined the Obama administration, Summers showcased his thinking on practically every economic ailment facing the country in a monthly *Financial Times* column. He is, in other words, not so much a bureaucratic imperialist as a natural-born economist, with all that implies about argumentative style. In the White House, his probing questions can sometimes make it unclear who's running a meeting and who's just attending, but they're standard fare in graduate seminars across the country.

In any case, Summers has actually worked hard to sand down his rough edges—and won surprisingly good reviews for his politicking. "He's not always been Mr. Diplomacy," Senator Kent Conrad recently told me. "But I have seen him use diplomatic skills equal to almost any I've seen on display in the current crisis . . . answering questions hour after hour after hour." Even those who've sparred with Summers consider him fundamentally persuadable. "He is the kind of guy that gives an opponent much wider latitude if they bring facts to bear," says one colleague.

Still, the star economist's own defend-

**WHITE HOUSE WATCH** ***With*** **DREW FRIEDMAN**

*After stimulating the economy, the president breaks for a smoke.*



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ers are quick to concede his faults—or, in some cases, even wield them as a cudgel. One Senate aide says that, when Geithner's tax problems cropped up, various Obama political hands not-so-subtly hinted that Summers would be next in line at Treasury—a way, they hoped, of making senators think twice before trashing their nominee.

Having to share territory with the inadvertently expansionist Summers could easily lead to a demoralizing trench war. But that won't be the case with Geithner. He's a man who made a career not only of exerting subtle bureaucratic influence, but of happily co-existing with Summers himself. (The two are good friends.) Even during the tax flap's most fevered moment—a Maureen Dowd column titled "Tim Geithner! Why Are Rich People So Cheap?" comes to mind—Geithner remained an internal force. At the time, *Politico* suggested Summers had horned in on the bank bailout—ostensibly Treasury's portfolio—noting that it was his name, not Geithner's, that appeared on a letter to Congress about the second $350 billion installment. But, while Summers did affix his name to the letter, Geithner and his staff actually authored it. Administration officials simply felt Summers was the more appropriate public face until Geithner could be confirmed.

In the coming days, Treasury will begin unveiling proposed fixes for the banking crisis that should make clear it is leading those efforts. In fact, Geithner has been building an inner sanctum geared toward having an impact across the board. His chief of staff is a former Tom Daschle lieutenant named Mark Patterson, who, not long ago, was considered one of the most powerful and wired aides in the Senate. "He knew everything about anything that happened on that floor," says one former colleague. "He can do the policy and the politics and the communications. It's a real gift." Patterson's tour in the Senate included a stint as a staff director for the Finance Committee, which afforded him enormous input on everything from taxes to Medicare and Social Security.

Even more significantly, Geithner has signed up Gene Sperling—who held Summers's current job back in the Clinton administration. The early reports on Sperling's hiring modestly described his title as "counselor," but this vastly undersells his mandate. As a practical matter, Sperling will be Geithner's deputy on domestic policy, giving Treasury a presence on the order of Summers and budget director Peter Orszag in negotiations over the stimulus, entitlements, and health care policy.

That Sperling has a chummy rapport with both men doesn't change the significance of his role. Insiders see Sperling as the key sign Geithner envisions a broad role. Indeed, the masochistically hard-working ex-Clintonite served as Treasury's ubiquitous proxy during White House stimulus discussions while Geithner managed his tax scandal.

By turning to Sperling, Geithner has also shifted the ideological balance in intramural debates. Geithner and Summers tend to see eye to eye on fiscal issues—they're both relative hawks. But Sperling's spending instincts are somewhat more liberal. Which is to say, by bringing Sperling aboard in part to protect his bureaucratic flank, Geithner may actually shift policy slightly to the left of where he'd prefer it.

In this, as with everything else, Geithner's early moves at Treasury reflect the habits that powered his rise from lowly civil servant to undersecretary in the '90s: Keep a low profile, solicit a range of opinions, trust your subordinates—and, above all, know your boss intimately.

What ultimately puts Geithner and Summers on equal footing is their formidable relationship with the president. Obama is said to be taken with Summers's intellectual nimbleness; it's not hard to imagine how the Harvard Law–grad president might be flattered to receive a daily economic briefing from the former president of Harvard, a ritual that began shortly after the inauguration. But Geithner and Obama have a kinship that grows out of both sociology and disposition. Like Obama, Geithner spent a chunk of his childhood overseas—first in India, then Thailand. His father was a Ford Foundation official who, according to *The New York Times*, actually funded a development project that employed Obama's mother. (The paper believes the two may have even met in Indonesia.) Geithner also exudes an Obama-like perma-cool. Steve Radelet, a former Treasury subordinate, recalls how he once ignited a bureaucratic uproar that wound up blowing back into Geithner's face. "He was very good at calling me in and saying, 'Look. You were right. It was exactly the right decision. But do me a favor, let me know next time,'" says Radelet.

In the end, Geithner should probably be more wary of another Clinton-era principal: Hillary. Foggy Bottom has spent the last month hinting at its designs on economic policy, which would presumably come at the expense of Treasury. The latest indications are that Hillary's first target may be the U.S.-China relationship, which Geithner's immediate predecessor, Hank Paulson, spearheaded in the Bush administration. Publicly, Treasury officials welcome a more active role for State. Privately, they say parting with Paulson's brainchild, the Strategic Economic Dialogue, is highly unlikely, noting Geithner's longstanding experience in the region. Let the border skirmishes begin.

*Noam Scheiber*

## The Right Man

*David Frum breaks ranks over cocktails.*

On the evening of January 20, as Washington's liberals were toasting the inauguration of Barack Obama, some of the city's most prominent conservative intellectuals escaped to the elegant Northwest Washington home of David Frum. In one room, Richard Perle—dressed in a jacket and royal-blue shirt, open at the collar—leaned against a fireplace as Norah Jones crooned softly on the stereo and tea candles flickered from the bookshelves. In the kitchen, ideologically themed drinks were arrayed on a table: Obama enthusiasts—both right-wing apostates and Frum's liberal guests—could drink Blue Hawaiians; Palinphobes could drink cosmopolitans; and, for supporters of the Alaska governor, there was (of course) beer. Even though the conservative movement had just suffered a total political meltdown, few guests seemed to be in a bitter mood. Frum—a courtly man in his late forties best known as the Bush speechwriter who helped craft the phrase "axis of evil"—had set a light tone for the gathering with his invitation, which asked guests to "Celebrate/Commiserate [cuz wtf else r we gna do?]"

If Frum didn't seem particularly angry about Obama's election, perhaps it's because, these days, he's more focused on the flaws plaguing his own end of the political spectrum. He had recently resigned from *National Review* in order to start his own publication, *NewMajority.com*, and the Inauguration Day gathering at his house doubled as a launch party for the venture. Frum says

ANTHONY RUSSO



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# How Your Brain Works

## Look Inside This Astonishingly Complex Organ with One of the Most Effective Teachers in America

Everything you hear, feel, see, and think is controlled by your brain. It allows you to cope masterfully with your everyday environment, and is capable of producing breathtaking athletic feats, sublime works of art, and profound scientific insights. But its most amazing achievement may be that it can understand itself.

**Understanding the Brain** takes you inside this astonishingly complex organ to show you how it works. Recent decades have seen unparalleled advances in understanding how the brain does what it does. Today we can pinpoint the specific regions where some of life's most mysterious processes take place.

You will share Professor Jeanette Norden's consuming passion in these 36 lively lectures, which Professor Norden has designed specifically for those without a background in science. "All you need to bring is your own brain and a desire to learn," she says.

Our endogenous reward system is considered responsible for the internal positive feelings we experience when engaging in activities as diverse as interacting with friends, reading a good book, or viewing a sunset. People who enjoy learning have these areas stimulated when they take a course such as this one—so reward yourself! Our brains are incredibly plastic, which means that we continue to learn from our experiences at any age in ways that enrich our lives.

### About Your Professor

Dr. Jeanette Norden is a neuroscientist, Professor of Cell and Developmental Biology in the School of Medicine, and Professor of Neurosciences in the College of Arts and Sciences at Vanderbilt University. Dr. Norden has won numerous university and national teaching awards and was the first recipient of the Chair of Teaching Excellence at Vanderbilt.

### About The Teaching Company

We review hundreds of top-rated professors from America's best colleges and universities each year. From this extraordinary group, we choose only those rated highest by panels of our customers. Fewer than 10% of these world-class scholar teachers are selected to make The Great Courses®.

We've been doing this since 1990, producing more than 3,000 hours of material in modern and ancient history, philosophy, literature, fine arts, the sciences, and mathematics for intelligent, engaged, adult lifelong learners. If a course is ever less than completely satisfying, you may exchange it for another, or we will refund your money promptly.

### About Our Sale Price Policy

Why is the sale price for this course so much lower than its standard price? Every course we make goes on sale at least once a year. Producing large quantities of only the sale courses keeps costs down and allows us to pass the savings on to you. This also enables us to fill your order immediately: 99% of all orders placed by 2 pm eastern time ship that same day. Order before April 10, 2009, to receive these savings.

© Images.com/Corbis

### Lecture Titles

1. Historical Underpinnings of Neuroscience
2. Central Nervous System—Gross Organization
3. Central Nervous System—Internal Organization
4. Central Nervous System—Subdivisions
5. Cortex—Lobes and Areas
6. Cortex—Sensory, Motor, and Association Areas
7. Central Nervous System—Development
8. Central Nervous System—Cellular Organization
9. Pathways and Synapses
10. Neurotransmitters
11. Stroke
12. The Visual System—The Eye
13. The Visual System—The Cortex
14. The Auditory System
15. The Somatosensory System
16. Agnosias
17. The Motor System—Voluntary Movement
18. The Motor System—Coordinated Movement
19. Parkinson's Disease
20. Language
21. The Limbic System—Anatomy
22. The Limbic System—Biochemistry
23. Depression
24. The Reward System—Anatomy
25. The Reward System—Drugs
26. Brain Plasticity
27. Emotion and Executive Function
28. Processing of Negative Emotions—Fear
29. Music and the Brain
30. Sexual Dimorphism of the Brain
31. Sleep and Dreaming
32. Consciousness and the Self
33. Alzheimer's Disease
34. Risk Factors for Alzheimer's Disease
35. Wellness and the Brain—Effects of Stress
36. Neuroscience—Looking Back and Looking Ahead

Please Note: These lectures are in no way designed to be used as medical references for the diagnosis or treatment of medical illnesses or trauma. Questions of diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions should be brought to the attention of qualified medical personnel.

THE TEACHING COMPANY®
*The Joy of Lifelong Learning Every Day™*
GREAT PROFESSORS, GREAT COURSES, GREAT VALUE GUARANTEED™

**SAVE $275!**
**OFFER GOOD UNTIL APRIL 10, 2009**

**1-800-TEACH-12 (1-800-832-2412)**
**Fax: 703-378-3819**

**Special offer is available online at**
**www.TEACH12.com/4nrep**

The Great Courses
THE TEACHING COMPANY
4151 Lafayette Center Drive, Suite 100
Chantilly, VA 20151-1232

**Priority Code 33243**

Please send me **Understanding the Brain**, which consists of thirty-six 30-minute lectures plus Course Guidebooks.

☐ **DVD $99.95** (std. price $374.95) **SAVE $275!**
plus $15 shipping, processing, and Lifetime Satisfaction Guarantee

☐ **Check or Money Order Enclosed**

* Non-U.S. Orders: Additional shipping charges apply. For more details, call us or visit the FAQ page on our website.

** Virginia residents please add 5% sales tax.

**Charge my credit card:**

☐ VISA ☐ ☐ ☐

Account Number — Exp. Date

Signature

Name (please print)

Mailing Address

City/State/ZIP

Phone (If we have questions regarding your order—required for international orders)

☐ **FREE CATALOG.** Please send me a free copy of your current catalog (no purchase necessary).

Special offer is available online at www.TEACH12.com/4nrep
Offer Good Through: April 10, 2009

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his project aims to be to conservatism what The New Republic was to liberalism during the 1980s. "The ideas that were hashed out in those pages became the basis of the Hart campaigns and the Clinton campaign in the 1990s," he told me. "If you understand that change takes time, these kinds of debates can have a big impact."

Frum's frustration with the conservative movement—"when things happen in it that I think are dangerous and destructive, I take it very personally," he says—dates back more than four years, to what he saw as the unsustainable cultural-populist swagger of the Bush-Cheney reelection campaign. Bush's parade of second-term fiascoes—from Iraq to Katrina to Harriet Miers—convinced Frum that Republicans were running their party into the ground by scaring off the educated middle class. In his 2007 book *Comeback: Conservatism That Can Win Again*, he advocated modernizing the GOP along the lines of David Cameron's Tories in Great Britain—by de-emphasizing social issues and focusing on good (but still small) government, climate change, income inequality, health care, and obesity.

Not everyone appreciated the advice. Ramesh Ponnuru, one of Frum's colleagues at *National Review*, criticized the book both in print and in several sharp-edged blog posts, complaining that some of Frum's proposals would impinge on conservative principle and alienate the GOP base. Today, Frum concedes that Ponnuru may have been right to allege that some of his ideas weren't really conservative. But that, he says, is conservatism's problem, not his. "One of the issues [Ponnuru] called me out on was that I'm very worried about the public health implications of obesity," Frum told me. "Ramesh said that *National Review*'s conservatism has no room to worry about a problem like that. That may even be right. If it's right, that doesn't make obesity any less of a public health problem. It may indicate the limits of conservatism."

Next came Sarah Palin. When John McCain chose her as a running mate last August, Frum wrote that her lack of experience "makes Barack Obama look like George C. Marshall." Even though he would eventually vote for McCain, he considered Palin a threat to national security as well as a troubling sign of the right's continued preference for fire-breathing hacks. "Here's a candidate who embodies and epitomizes not just conservative values but a conservative style," he told me. "At the same time, she's a person who inspires very little confidence in her ability to run a modern government. Which of these things is more important to you?" At *National Review*, Palin became a source of rancor, with some writers defending her while others—such as syndicated columnist Kathleen Parker, whose articles on the magazine's website drew reams of hate mail—vehemently denounced her. Frum soon resigned. "I think a little more distance can help everybody do a better job of keeping their temper," he explained to *The New York Times*.

Now, Frum is hoping his modest website—which, he explains, is "a partnership between myself and some private investors"—can have big consequences. "I'm going to see if we can build an online community that models what future conservative political organizations are going to look like," he says. The site contains a detailed comments policy that aims to enforce civility: "While we do not censor comments based on political or ideological point of view, comments that are abusive, engage in personal attacks, contain racist, sexist, homophobic or other slurs, express hatred, are off-topic, use excessive foul language, or include any other type of ad hominem attacks (including comments that celebrate the death or illness of any person, public figure or otherwise) will be subject to removal." Meanwhile, in addition to established voices like former McCain adviser Douglas Holtz-Eakin, Frum has enlisted a quirky group of contributors, including an ex–Social Security administrator, a former naval intelligence officer, a Teach For America participant, a military wife, an ex–defense consultant who writes under the pseudonym "J. Moses Browning," an anonymous French civil servant, and even an official from the Carter administration—not exactly Whittaker Chambers or William F. Buckley. He also hired an investigative reporter—a former RNC aide whose biggest scoop so far was the revelation that $180,000 worth of Sarah Palin's clothes were, months after the election, still lying around RNC headquarters in trash bags.

Amid the identifiable Washingtonians at Frum's party—the Tucker Carlsons and the Doug Feiths—there was an



David Cowles

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

eager sub-society of young bloggers and editors that Frum seems to have hired from all corners of the country during the past few months. The kids spent time in huddled discussion about the dilapidated state of conservatism. "How can we expect to win when we're spending millions against our own candidates?" one of them asked me, referring to conservative pressure groups that target moderate Republicans. Presiding over his new community in a lime-green tie, Frum looked harried but satisfied. Policing their movement for gay bashing, distributing the musings of an anonymous French civil servant—these may not be the ways that conservative intellectuals traditionally dream of spending their time. But really, at this point, wtf else r they gna do?

*Barron YoungSmith*

## ¡Viva Chai!

*The lefty hot spot in Obama's Washington.*

Throughout history, political movements have often developed informal social headquarters alongside their official central commands. The eighteenth-century London Tories had a pub called Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese. The 1930s French rightists had the Café de Flore. George W. Bush's polo-shirted young Republicans had Smith Point, a preppy bar in Georgetown. And, even though Barack Obama's reign in Washington is only a couple of weeks old, his followers here have already found an unofficial home of their own: Busboys and Poets, a restaurant cum left-wing bookstore cum performance space one block north of U Street, the former Black Broadway turned hipster hub. On inauguration weekend, Busboys was open 24 hours a day, and lines to fête Obama formed outside Sunday through Tuesday. Alice Walker, Eve Ensler of the Vagina Monologues, and Representative John Conyers all came to toast change beneath paintings of Obama, the Dalai Lama, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Edward Said.

That prominent liberals feel comfortable hanging out in a joint that hawks copies of *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children's Literature* isn't so surprising. It was Obama, after all, who made it possible for liberals to have out-there pals like Bill Ayers (who was scheduled to speak at Busboys until the crowd got too big) and still be perceived as normal—even cool. But perhaps even more miraculous has been Obama's mainstreaming of the left. As one might expect from a place where, up until the inauguration, the biggest mob scene had been a Howard Zinn talk, Busboys has its share of scruffy-bearded activists. But, under the benevolent gaze of the new president's seven portraits, they drink Gewürztraminer and happily co-exist on leather couches with buppies in elegant stiletto boots.

Andy Shallal, the restaurant's Iraqi-American owner, admits that when Busboys first opened in late 2005, it had a more radical edge. "That it be an antiwar place was my intent, as an antiwar person myself," Shallal explains to me over coffee in the Langston Room, the adjoining theater space that recently played host to a night of poetry and performances to celebrate the unveiling of the Edward Said portrait. A bald man with soft, smiling eyes and a nondescript brown coat, Shallal looks a bit like Gandhi, if Gandhi had been bigger and had regularly parked himself behind a MacBook Air. Among the early actions: The women's antiwar group CodePink installed a huge ziggurat of shoes representing dead Iraqi children outside the door, aggressively defining the restaurant's politics right there on the sidewalk. (CodePink has appointed Shallal, a serious peace activist himself, their "head of the auxiliary men's unit.") Shallal has his own tale of discovering his eatery's hotbeds of radicalism: "We had a gathering of the Revolutionary Communist Party," he remembers, "and I turn around, and I see one of my hostesses is a member!"

But, beyond providing a home for his fellow peace-movement travelers, Shallal had a larger aim in opening Busboys, one that would end up jibing perfectly with the Obama ethos: racial reconciliation. Shallal's friend John Cavanagh, the director of a left-wing think tank, remembers conversations the two had before the restaurant opened: "We would talk about how Washington is an apartheid city, and, to create one of its first really diverse spaces, everything that Andy did—and Andy is a genius—had to be intentional."

Even the new restaurant's name needed to strike the right tone. "Broken Bread Café" was out because of the negative implications of "broken," and, as *Washingtonian* magazine explained in 2005, Shallal ultimately rejected "The White Rabbit Café"—which he'd thought up after watching *The Matrix*—because "[b]lacks would think it was not for them, and 'café' conjured up a world of bourgeois pleasures." Shallal even considered hanging a sign in the door that would read, "BLACK PEOPLE WELCOME."

The sign never materialized, but the black people did. Soon after Busboys and Poets opened, now-Mayor Adrian Fenty, then a young city council member in the post-ideological Obama style, started having a chicken sandwich there nearly every day. "I love the atmosphere," enthuses Fenty. "There's huge variety—my [Department of Transportation] employees are always there, and then you've got the whole U Street crowd." Fledgling Obama meet-up groups followed suit, phoning Shallal to reserve table space. When Obama finally announced his candidacy in February of 2007, Busboys and Poets's watch party had the Langston Room packed and an overflow area outside.

But even more than its anti-Iraq-war politics or its black-friendly philosophy, Busboys shared something else with the Obama movement: a belief that even the most hairshirt lefty secretly craves style. "As someone who grew up in the late sixties and seventies and had been involved in a lot of activism, I was always, always uncomfortable, at some level, with having to always meet in dingy, dark spaces—smelly, in some church basement, the lighting's always bad, the coffee's horrible," explains Shallal. "Human beings need aesthetics. You need to create a space that opens up your heart, opens up your mind, opens up your soul, and elevates your sensibilities." Like the Obama movement, Shallal set about divorcing liberalism from granola and marrying it with a sexy, modern, faintly intellectual hipness. Busboys's ceiling is coffered, the chandeliers are modish, the CD player loops Amy Winehouse and Akon, there are no grimy plastic tubs to bus your own plates, and only a couple of dishes on the menu feature tofu. Busboys is a place where Democrats, says Shallal, "can actually dress up nicely and there's no reason to be ashamed to be a liberal."

Busboys and Poets's precise variety of cool—is there any other establishment in America that slings Moët champagne-pear cocktails and also sells the Weather Underground DVD?—can be a delicate thing to maintain. This past Mardi Gras, Shallal showed up at the restaurant to discover that somebody had invited over the Bacardi Girls, scantily clad women who go around bars offering people promotional rum shooters. He had to ask the Girls to leave. Another time,

ANTHONY RUSSO



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

by accident, he tipped the equilibrium dangerously the other way by hiring a "visionary activist astrologer" to perform a winter solstice ritual. As the astrologer, beating on tom-tom drums, threaded between the restaurant's gaping patrons, Shallal realized it had probably been a bad idea. "At that time of night, maybe sixty percent of our clientele is black, and you had this white woman telling everybody to be quiet and she's going to conjure spirits."

But, despite the pressure, the restaurant—like its new hero—has made few errors. Especially since the inauguration, it has been constantly thronged with diverse, chic guests; there was even a Matt Dillon spotting. And, in a development sure to surprise even the most visionary astrologer, Republicans have begun to admit that Busboys may represent a vision of the future. Over the past couple of years, the Bush State Department has sent groups of foreign professionals on exchange to witness the restaurant's scene and have lunch. "The State Department loves us because we represent many of those values that people feel are American," says Shallal. There's racial harmony, there's material ease, and there's the freedom to sell a Weathermen DVD without having to get all squirrelly about it.

*Eve Fairbanks*

## Purple Heart

*The inaugural-ticket victims who won't go quietly.*

In the heady days leading up to Barack Obama's inauguration, Washington was abuzz with speculation about the next great cause his legion of idealistic, tech-savvy supporters would tackle. Would they harness their collective Facebook energies to combat global warming? Or would they turn their Twittering talents toward fighting for universal health care? In the dawn of this new political era, anything seemed possible. And it was only a few hours after his swearing-in that the first great grassroots campaign of the Obama presidency commenced—only it turned out to be something slightly less exalted than originally predicted: getting justice for the Survivors of the Purple Tunnel of Doom.

The effort is the brainchild—albeit the unplanned one—of two thirtysomething Democratic political consultants, Marisa McNee and Dave Meyer. At eight o'clock in the morning on Inauguration Day, McNee and Meyer set off from their D.C. homes to the Capitol to watch Obama's swearing-in ceremony. Through a friend on the Hill, McNee had scored two of the 240,000 color-coded tickets issued by the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies: Yellow and orange tickets entitled their holders to seats close to the podium; blue, purple, and silver tickets provided entrée to standing-room sections in front of the Capitol. McNee and Meyer had purple tickets. But, as they tried to make their way to the entrance for their appointed section, they were shuffled, along with thousands of other purple-ticket holders, into the Third Street Tunnel that runs underneath the National Mall.

That's where things started to go horribly wrong. For more than two hours, they stood in the dank, white-tiled tunnel with perhaps as many as 10,000 other people, waiting to gain entry to the Capitol grounds. To pass the time, they talked to the people in line in front of them—a couple from Michigan, one of whom was active with the United Auto Workers—while others in the tunnel chanted and broke into impromptu renditions of "Lean On Me." But the jovial mood could only mask the reality of their surroundings for so long. With no police or security presence of any sort in the tunnel—and with thousands of people eager to see history—it was a dangerous situation. The situation only became more dangerous as the hour of Obama's swearing-in drew closer, and the crowd became increasingly frantic to get through the gates to see it. Shortly after noon, many of those in the crowd, realizing they had missed the historic moment they had longed to see, burst into tears.

Fortunately for McNee and Meyer, they had given up and left the tunnel at 10:45—and headed to an Adams Morgan restaurant, where they watched the proceedings on television over brunch. Inspiration struck later that afternoon, when they read a post by the Middle East blogger Marc Lynch titled "The Purple Tunnel of Doom," recounting Lynch's own failed efforts to gain admission to the purple section. Meyer suggested that, as a joke, he and McNee start a Facebook group called "Survivors of the Purple Tunnel of Doom." They sent out invitations to only a handful of their friends—fellow activists and political consultants who, they knew, had held purple tickets. When McNee and Meyer checked the Facebook group that evening, however, its membership had ballooned to more than 1,000 people. "Most of the people on there were people we didn't even know," says Meyer. "That's when we realized this was pretty big."

And that's when Meyer and McNee—or, as she is now known by one of her fellow survivors, the "Purple Angel of Hope"—decided to turn their joke into a cause. First, they began reaching out to the press—everyone from the *The Huffington Post* to *The New York Times*. Like the political pros that they are, they made certain that they weren't the story. After all, the tale of two single, white political consultants who rode the Metro to Obama's inauguration only to be turned away isn't that compelling. Instead, the pair steered reporters toward, as McNee calls them, the "normal people … people who traveled all the way from California and spent thousands of dollars and didn't get in, … [and] the older African American people who'd waited a very long time to see this day and didn't get in."

With the press sufficiently outraged on these purple people's behalf, McNee and Meyer then turned up the heat on Terrance Gainer, who, as the Senate sergeant at arms, was in charge of security at Obama's swearing-in and who'd earned the enmity of the purple masses when he initially estimated that only 3,000 to 4,000 ticket holders had been kept out—and that bulky winter clothing was to blame for their exclusion. When McNee and Meyer's calls to Gainer's office went unreturned, they complained about it to *The Washington Post*. The next day, Gainer met in his Capitol office with McNee and Meyer for more than an hour; two days after that he met with them again; and the day after that—exactly one week after Inauguration Day—Gainer appeared on the "Survivors of the Purple Tunnel of Doom" page (he had joined Facebook the night before) to issue a public apology and to take questions from its members, which by then numbered close to 6,000.

McNee and Meyer are most interested in getting to the bottom of what went wrong on Inauguration Day. "It was a very dangerous situation, and we don't want it repeated again," says Meyer. To that end, he and McNee successfully lobbied for a federal investigation, which should be completed within 30 days. Meanwhile, Florida Representative Debbie Wasserman-Schultz recently contacted McNee and Meyer to inform them that she plans to hold hearings on the matter next month. But other purple-tunnel survivors want more than that. Their Facebook page has turned into a support group and a place to list demands. "I was at Trader Joe's yesterday, and there was a long waiting line that circled all the way across the store. … All of a sudden I am having an anxiety attack waiting in that line because it felt like I was back



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the tunnel waiting in a line that will never move," reported one purple-ticket holder from New York, prompting similar tales of post-traumatic stress from others. Ideas are bandied about over appropriate forms of compensation. Some have suggested reimbursement for travel expenses. One D.C. purple person proposed to Gainer: "I recommend that you work with the President to set up another event at a DC location, like the Verizon Center or the new Nationals Baseball Stadium, where the President Barack Obama stops by and talks to those who had Purple tickets. He would only need to stop by for an hour or two. He could give a speech, shake hands, take photos, etc."

Some of the griping has even morphed into a certain sense of pride. As a purple-ticket holder who works at the Department of Health and Human Services wrote on the Facebook page, "maybe someday when my grandkids ask where I was 'that day,' I'll be able to laugh and say something like, 'Well, technically I was "there", but I didn't see anything that day … you see I'm part of the infamous Survivors of the Purple Tunnel of Doom' … and they will marvel with awe, because [they] will have heard rumors of the legend."

Indeed, the legend of the Survivors of the Purple Tunnel of Doom has grown so large that it's begun to breed some resentment among non-purple-ticket holders who weren't admitted to the inaugural ceremonies—and whose plight has failed to coalesce into a mass movement. The "Tangled Up in Blue: Nightmare Shut out at the Inaugural's Blue Gate" group on Facebook, for instance, has fewer than 400 members. "Many think it's just the tunnel. They have no idea," complained one self-described "Silver Checkpoint Survivor" on Facebook. Meyer and McNee are aware of the importance of coalition-building. "Every now and then, someone pops up on our Facebook page and says, 'Don't forget silver! Don't forget blue!'" says McNee. "That's good. We've tried to be very welcoming of all the other people."

*Jason Zengerle*

*David Cowles*



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# Conservatism Is Dead

*An intellectual autopsy of the movement.*

SAM TANENHAUS

In the tumultuous history of postwar American conservatism, defeats have often contained the seeds of future victory. In 1954, the movement's first national tribune, Senator Joseph McCarthy, was checkmated by the Eisenhower administration and then "condemned" by his Senate colleagues. But the episode, and the passions it aroused, led to the founding of *National Review*, the movement's first serious political journal. Ten years later, the right's next leader, Barry Goldwater, suffered one of the most lopsided losses in election history. Yet the "draft Goldwater" campaign secured control of the GOP for movement conservatives. In 1976, the insurgent challenge by Goldwater's heir, Ronald Reagan, to incumbent president Gerald Ford was thwarted. But Reagan's crusade positioned him to win the presidency four years later and initiate the conservative "revolution" that remade our politics over the next quarter-century. In each instance, crushing defeat gave the movement new strength and pushed it further along the route to ultimate victory.

Today, the situation is much bleaker. After George W. Bush's two terms, conservatives must reckon with the consequences of a presidency that failed, in large part, because of its fervent commitment to movement ideology: the aggressively unilateralist foreign policy; the blind faith in a deregulated, Wall Street–centric market; the harshly punitive "culture war" waged against liberal "elites." That these precepts should have found their final, hapless defender in John McCain, who had resisted them for most of his long career, only confirms that movement doctrine retains an inflexible and suffocating grip on the GOP.

More telling than Barack Obama's victory is the consensus, steadily building since Election Day, that the nation has sunk—or been plunged—into its darkest economic passage since the Great Depression. And, as Obama pushes boldly ahead, apparently with public support, the right is struggling to reclaim its authority as the voice of opposition. The contrast with 1993, when the last Democratic president took office, is instructive. Like Obama, Bill Clinton was elected in hard economic times and, like him, promised a stimulus program, only to see his modest proposal ($19.5 billion) stripped almost bare by the Senate majority leader, Bob Dole, even though Democrats had handily won the White House and Senate Republicans formed nearly as small a minority as they do today. The difference was that the Republicans—disciplined, committed, self-assured—held the ideological advantage, which Dole leveraged through repeated use of the filibuster. Today, such a stratagem seems unthinkable. There is instead almost universal agreement—reinforced by the penitential testimony of Alan Greenspan and, more recently, by grudgingly conciliatory Republicans—that the most plausible economic rescue will involve massive government intervention, quite possibly on the scale of the New Deal/Fair Deal of the 1930s and '40s and perhaps even the New Frontier/Great Society of the 1960s. All this suggests that movement doctrine has not only been defeated but discredited.

Yet, even as the right begins to regroup, it is not clear that its leaders have absorbed the full implications of their defeat. They readily concede that the Democrats are in charge and, in Obama, have a leader of rare political skills. Many on the right also admit that the specific failures of the outgoing administration were legion. But what of the verdict issued on movement conservatism itself?

There, conservatives have offered little apart from self-justifications mixed with harsh appraisals of the Bush years. Some argue that the administration wasn't conservative at all, at least not in the "small government" sense. This is true, but then no president in modern times has seriously attempted to reduce the size of government, and for good reason: Voters don't want it reduced. What they want is government that's "big" for *them*—whether it's Democrats who call for job-training programs and universal health care or Republicans eager to see billions funneled into "much-needed and underfunded defense procurement," as William Kristol recommended shortly after Obama's victory.

Others on the right blame Bush's heterodoxy on interlopers, chief among them Kristol's band of neoconservative warriors at *The Weekly Standard*, who beguiled the administration into the Iraq war and an ill-starred Wilsonian crusade for global democracy. But here again the facts are complicated: Bush's foreign policy owes no more to the neoconservative vision of exportable democracy than to the hard-right "rollback" philosophy of the cold war years. Bush's preemptive war against jihadists, with its promise to "take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge," echoes Goldwater's assertion, in 1960, that "given the dynamic, revolutionary character of the enemy's challenge, we [must] … always try to engage the enemy at times and places, and with weapons, of our own choosing." And it was Reagan, the hero of the movement's putative golden age, who, in 1982, called for a worldwide "crusade for freedom that will engage the faith and fortitude of the next generation."

Perhaps, then, the explanation lies not in the Republicans' ideas but in the defective marketing of them. This is the line taken by party strategists who think Karl Rove and his team of operatives grew complacent after their victories in 2002 and 2004 and failed to update "the brand" to suit changing demographics in Sunbelt states like Colorado and Nevada, with their socially liberal white professionals and economically liberal blue-collar Hispanics. But this thesis evades a big question: Does the movement have anything to offer such constituencies apart from a plea for their votes?

What conservatives have yet to do is confront the large but inescapable truth that movement conservatism is exhausted and quite possibly dead. And yet they should, because the death of movement politics can only be a boon to the right,

*Sam Tanenhaus is editor of The New York Times Book Review and Week in Review and is at work on a biography of William F. Buckley Jr.*



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

since it has been clear for some time the movement is profoundly and defiantly *un*-conservative—in its ideas, arguments, strategies, and above all its vision.

What passes for conservatism today would have been incomprehensible to its originator, Edmund Burke, who, in the late eighteenth century, set forth the principles by which governments might nurture the "organic" unity that bound a people together even in times of revolutionary upheaval. Burke's conservatism was based not on a particular set of ideological principles but rather on distrust of *all* ideologies. In his most celebrated writings, his denunciation of the French Revolution and its English champions, Burke did not seek to justify the *ancien régime* and its many inequities. Nor did he propose a counter-ideology. Instead he warned against the destabilizing perils of revolutionary politics, beginning with its totalizing nostrums. Robespierre and Danton, the movement ideologues of their day, were inflamed with the Enlightenment vision of the ideal civilization and sacrificed to its abstractions the established traditions and institutions of what Burke called "civil society." They placed an idea of the perfect society over and above the need to improve society as it really existed.

At the same time, Burke recognized that governments were obligated to use their powers to meliorate intolerable conditions. He had, for example, supported the American Revolution because its architects, unlike the French rebels, had not sought to destroy the English government; on the contrary, they petitioned for just representation within it. Had King George III complied, he would have strengthened, not weakened, the Crown and Parliament. Instead, he had inflexibly clung to the hard line and so shared responsibility for the Americans' revolt. "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation," Burke warned. The task of the statesman was to maintain equilibrium between "[t]he two principles of conservation and correction." Governance was a perpetual act of compromise—"sometimes between good and evil, and sometimes between evil and evil." In such a scheme there is no useful place for the either/or of ideological purism.

The story of postwar American conservatism is best understood as a continual replay of a single long-standing debate. On one side are those who have upheld the Burkean ideal of replenishing civil society by adjusting to changing conditions. On the other are those committed to a revanchist counterrevolution, the restoration of America's pre–welfare state *ancien régime*. And, time and again, the counterrevolutionaries have won. The result is that modern American conservatism has dedicated itself not to fortifying and replenishing civil society but rather to weakening it through a politics of civil warfare.

How did this happen? One reason is that the most intellectually sophisticated founders of postwar conservatism were in many instances ex-Marxists, who moved from left to right but remained persuaded that they were living in revolutionary times and so retained their absolutist fervor. In place of the Marxist dialectic they formulated a Manichaean politics of good and evil, still with us today, and their strategy was to build a movement based on organizing cultural antagonisms. Many have observed that movement politics most clearly defines itself not by what it yearns to conserve but by what it longs to destroy—"statist" social programs; "socialized medicine"; "big labor"; "activist" Supreme Court justices, the "media elite"; "tenured radicals" on university faculties; "experts" in and out of government.

But, if it's clear what the right is against, what exactly has it been *for*? This question has haunted the movement from its inception in the 1950s, when its principal objective was to undo the New Deal and reinstate the laissez-faire Republicanism of the 1920s. This backward-looking program mystified one leading conservative. Whittaker Chambers, a repentant ex-communist, had passed through a brief counterrevolutionary phase but then, in his last years, had gravitated toward a genuinely classic conservatism. He distilled his thinking in a remarkable sequence of letters written from the self-imposed exile of his Maryland farm, and sent to a young admirer, William F. Buckley Jr. When their relationship began, Buckley—a self-described "radical conservative"—was assembling the group of thinkers and writers who would form the core of *National Review*, a journal conceived to contest the "liberal monopolists of 'public opinion.'" Buckley was especially keen to recruit Chambers. But Chambers turned him down. He sympathized with the magazine's opposition to increasingly centralized government, but, in practical terms, he believed challenging it was futile. It was evident that New Deal economics had become the basis for governing in postwar America, and the right had no plausible choice but to accept this fact—not because liberals were all-powerful (as some on the right believed) but rather because what the right called "statism" looked very much like a Burkean "correction."

Chambers witnessed the popular demand for the New Deal firsthand. He raised milch cattle, and his neighbors were farmers. Most were archconservative, even reactionary. They had sent the segregationist Democrat Millard Tydings to the Senate, and then, when Tydings had opposed McCarthy's Red-hunting investigations, they had voted him out of office. They were also sworn enemies of programs like FDR's Agricultural Adjustment Act, which tried to offset the volatility of markets by controlling crop yields and fixing prices. Some had even been indicted for refusing to allow farm officials to inspect their crops. Nonetheless, Chambers observed, his typical neighbor happily accepted federal subsidies. In other words, the farmers wanted it both ways. They wanted the freedom to grow as much as they could, even though it was against their best interests. But they also expected the government to bail them out in difficult times. In sum, "the farmers are signing for a socialist agriculture with their feet."

To Chambers, an avid student of history, this trend toward government reliance was a function of the unstoppable rise of industrial capitalism and the new technology it had brought forth. Chambers put the matter bluntly: "The machine has made the economy socialistic." And the right had better adjust. "A conservatism that will not accept this situation, he wrote, "is not a political force, or even a twitch: it has become a literary whimsy." It might well be "the duty of intellectuals . . . to preach reaction," but only "from an absolute, an ideal standpoint. It is for books and posterity. It does not bear on tactics or daily life. . . . Those who remain in the world, if they will not surrender on its terms, must maneuver within its terms. That is what conservatives must decide: how much to give in order to survive at all; how much to give in order not to give up the basic principles."

It sounded like Burke, though Chambers occupied what he called "the Beaconsfield position," a reference to the Earl of Beaconsfield—a.k.a. Benjamin Disraeli, after Burke the second great figure in classic conservatism. In his long

ANTHONY RUSSO



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

career, which spanned most of the nineteenth century, Disraeli advocated "just, necessary, expedient" policies—that is, the policies the public demanded even when they contradicted his own ideological certitudes. Disraeli conceived this approach during the Industrial Revolution, which had caused a serious rupture in England's social structure and also in its politics, as a rising class of capitalists began to accumulate vast wealth and demanded more say, via voting reform, in a government still dominated by the Crown and landed aristocrats. At first, Disraeli favored the status quo because he believed that the monarchy bound different classes together and that centuries of feudal obligation had instilled in the nobility a deep sense of responsibility to the poor, who were most vulnerable to exploitation in the industrialists' factories and workhouses. But, ultimately, Disraeli realized the futility of this argument. As a statesman, he became an innovative reformer, partly to outflank the Liberals, partly to keep the Conservative party viable in a time of dynamic upheaval, but also because he came to see that, in the modern age, conservatism required an activist government that guarded the interests and needs of the entire population.

Chambers was not alone in seeing a divide between classic conservative thought and the polarizing politics of the movement. Indeed he seems to have been influenced by "The Politics of Nostalgia," an essay by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. published in June 1955, five months before the first issue of *National Review* appeared. Schlesinger's subject was the unexpected rise of "conservatism as a respectable social philosophy" in the postwar period. One book in particular, Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*, a sumptuously written survey of the classic Anglo-American tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had attracted much attention. But, Schlesinger noted, there was a strange disconnect. Kirk and others genuinely revered traditional conservatism. And yet, once "they leave the stately field of rhetoric and get down to actual issues of social policy, they tend quietly to forget about Burke and Disraeli and to adopt the views of the American business community." Kirk, for example, denounced federally sponsored school lunch programs as a "vehicle for totalitarianism" and Social Security as a form of "remorseless collectivism."

Where in this, Schlesinger asked, was even a hint of classic conservatism, with its concern for the social and moral costs of unchecked industrial capitalism?

> Disraeli with his legislation on behalf of trade unions, his demand for government intervention to improve working conditions, his belief in due process and civil freedom, his support for the extension of suffrage, his insistence on the principle of compulsory education! If there is anything in contemporary America that might win the instant sympathy of men like Shaftesbury and Disraeli, it could well be the school lunch program. But for all his talk of mutual responsibility and the organic character of society, Professor Kirk, when he gets down to cases, tends to become a roaring Manchester liberal of the Herbert Hoover school.

For years to come, this paradox would roil the right, which remained split between the Burkean politics of realistic adjustment and the revanchist politics of counterrevolution. The realist Chambers, agreeing at last to write for *National Review*, clung to the Beaconsfield position. He supported the Eisenhower administration's negotiations with the Soviets, defended civil liberties, praised the writings of John Kenneth Galbraith. Another realist, Garry Wills, *National Review*'s wunderkind in the 1950s and early '60s, urged a consensus conservatism that "can give the practical art of politics a combination of flexibility and stability" and also "seek 'the common good,' not as some ideal scheme of order, or quantitative accumulation of individual goods, but as the real life of the 'commonality,' of community in all its enriching forms." By contrast, the revanchist (and ex-Trotskyist) Willmoore Kendall—a mentor to both Buckley and Wills—advocated a contemporary politics waged in military terms, "a line of battle between two sets of *combatants*, each fighting to *defeat* the other … there is a *battle in progress*, even a *war in progress*."

At first these debates were intellectual sideshows, with no overt connection to the actual politics of the time. The 1950s and early '60s were the apex of bipartisan consensus. No matter who was in office, whether it was the tightfisted Eisenhower or the free-spending Kennedy and Johnson, government inexorably expanded, driven by the twin engines of what Eisenhower called the "military-industrial complex" and a booming post-industrial economy that made it possible to improve conditions for the mass of citizens. But, by the late '60s, the situation had changed. Social disruptions similar to the kinds Burke and Disraeli had experienced had come to America. A "communications revolution" created a culture of continual novelty. And the Vietnam quagmire, combined with a civil rights movement shifting from hope to frustration, undermined the authority of the Democratic Party and its current version of New Deal liberalism. The same policymakers who conceived and executed New Frontier and Great Society programs, from the Peace Corps and Vista to the War on Poverty, were helpless to manage a politics of countercultural protest—from the Berkeley Free Speech Movement to the March on the Pentagon to riots in Watts and Detroit. The most conspicuous energies flowed outside the bounds of organized government and normative society and, in many instances, *against* them both.

Conditions were ripe for a resurgent conservatism predicated on reasserting the values of institutional stability. One who saw this was Buckley, whose politics had steadily matured. In 1968, a cataclysmic year in which two political assassinations and a series of riots made it seem that the country might actually descend into anarchy, Buckley, writing in explicitly Burkean terms, affirmed the need to maintain social order, even if it meant preserving the welfare state. Weeks before the two national conventions were held (each eclipsed by a riot), Buckley wrote a column based on a remark Gerry Bush, a young operative in Hubert Humphrey's campaign, had made to a British journalist. "We can win the election in November," he had said, "but then can we govern the country?" Buckley interviewed Bush and reported that Bush's "stated worries were by no means confined to the difficulties that a Humphrey administration would have in governing the country. He meant that the serious question has arisen: Can *anyone* govern the country?"

Buckley had begun to give serious thought to Chambers's equation: "how much to give in order not to give up the basic principles." The reason was a rapid sequence of election campaigns—Goldwater's for president in 1964, Buckley's own for mayor of New York City in 1965, and Reagan's election as governor of California in 1966. Each episode had reinforced a political home truth: The right had a chance of prevailing, but only if it attracted the broad base of voters who were non-ideological and, in some cases, not even attached to either major party. To attract these voters in the middle, the GOP had to acknowledge that most were as dependent on big government as Chambers's Maryland neighbors had been. What was more, amid the upheavals of the '60s citizens wanted


LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

government—specifically the federal government—to exert the authority Burke and Disraeli had claimed for it. It made no sense for conservatives to attack "statism" when it was institutions of "the State" that formed the bedrock of civil society. In 1967, when Reagan, soon after his election, was being accused of having sold out his anti-government principles—not least because he had submitted the highest budget in state history—Buckley wondered what exactly critics expected Reagan to do, "padlock the state treasury and give speeches on the Liberty amendment?"

It was this new sophistication that propelled modern American conservatism to the heights it reached in 1965–1975, its peak period as an intellectual force. In those years, *The Public Interest* came into existence, with its rigorously nonpartisan policy analysis; *Commentary* published searching essays by writers left (Richard Goodwin), right (Jeane Kirkpatrick), and center (Daniel Patrick Moynihan); *National Review* published Wills and Joan Didion along with bracing columns by Buckley (who proposed, in 1969, that the country would benefit from the election of a black president), James Burnham, and Frank Meyer. The period's two most prescient political books—Wills's *Nixon Agonistes* and Kevin Phillips's *The Emerging Republican Majority*—were shaped in the crucible of the right, and drew on its vocabulary, but were exercises in analysis, not in polemics. Sifting through the 1968 election, Wills concluded: "The liberal Eastern Establishment found it was not needed on election day—which made its leaders take a second look at the Forgotten American, at an angry baffled middle class that, paying the bill for progress, found its values mocked by spokesmen for that progress. These voters felt cheated, disregarded, robbed of respect; and unless their support could be reenlisted, the Establishment's brand of liberalism would perish as a political force."

Phillips, meanwhile, was one of several thinkers who examined a crucial distinction between the New Deal and the Great Society. The first had been a response to an economic emergency. A fearful public had been clamoring for help, and the government had met it responsibly. But the Great Society was developed at a time of supreme confidence among the governing class, who were convinced they could preemptively cure ills invisible to others. Policy intellectuals had moved ahead of the public—perhaps too far ahead. The "war on poverty was not declared at the behest of the poor," Moynihan wrote in the first issue of *The Public Interest* in 1965. "Just the opposite. The poor were not only invisible … they were also silent." Coal miners in the Appalachians, the first targeted beneficiaries, "were desperately poor, shockingly unemployed, but neither radical nor in any significant way restive." The radicalism, such as it was, originated inside the Beltway. Once the program got under way, there was "little involvement from the workers themselves."

As liberals unwittingly squeezed themselves into the stereotypes conservatives had invented, conservative intellectuals began to look like prophets for identifying a self-appointed "managerial elite" (Burnham's term from 1941) that was leading a "liberal revolution" (Kendall's, from 1963). The poor—believers in the American dream, content to struggle upward on their own—had become "a project" for technocrats intoxicated with *nostalgie de la boue*. In his book *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, Moynihan—disillusioned with the programs he helped instate—ridiculed the pretensions of social scientists, "who love poor people [and] … get along fine with rich people" but "do not have much time for the people in between." "In particular," he wrote, "they would appear to have but little sympathy with the desire for order, and anxiety about change, that are commonly encountered among working-class and lower middle-class persons. The privileged children of the upper middle classes more and more devoted themselves, in the name of helping the oppressed, to outraging the people in between." The absurdities of "social engineering" became sport for observers like Tom Wolfe, who satirized their excesses in *Mau-mauing the Flak Catchers*: "So the poverty professionals were always on the lookout for the bad-acting dudes who were the 'real leaders,' the 'natural leaders,' the 'charismatic figures,' in the ghetto jungle."

This liberal overreach combined with the right's new sophistication promised a new period in U.S. politics, one in which conservatives, fortified by Burkean principles, might emerge as the most articulate voices of "civil society," separating out the strands of true reform, which drew on inherited values, from "liberal-left" attempts to make those values extinct. Perhaps the Great Society could be retooled, tamed into a legitimate extension of the New Deal. But, to accomplish this, the right would have to deal honestly with capitalism and its many ambiguities.

In 1958, Chambers had declared (following Disraeli): "Conservatism is alien to the very nature of capitalism whose love of life and growth is perpetual change. We are living in one of its periods of breathless acceleration of change." This contradiction and others animated "Capitalism Today," a special issue of *The Public Interest* published in 1970. In an ambitious essay, Daniel Bell wrote that capitalism was transforming society and that "the corporate class," America's most powerful, had "abdicated" its obligation to reconcile its modernizing impulses with traditional values and so bore some responsibility for a contemporary culture in which "antinomianism and anti-institutionalism ruled." Writing in the same issue, Irving Kristol lauded two intellectuals of the industrial era, Matthew Arnold and Herbert Croly—both "liberal reformer[s] with essentially conservative goals." Arnold, Disraeli's contemporary, had deplored the philistinism of the business elite, its complacent indifference to humanism and the arts, while Croly, in his book *The Promise of American Life*, had exposed the emptiness of free-market liturgy and its corollary belief that moral and social benefits could be achieved "merely by liberating the enlightened self-enterprise of the American people." Kristol himself lamented "the ideological barrenness of the liberal and conservative creeds" and said that what America needed was a "combination of the reforming spirit with the conservative ideal."

In retrospect, two horrific events, Vietnam and Watergate, crowd out all other memories of the early 1970s. But the decade began with the promise of a mature conservatism. Richard Nixon, who took office as a credentialed anti-communist, had the authority to orchestrate a quick end to the Vietnam war, something voters clearly wanted. The civil disruptions that had plagued the late '60s also seemed soluble since the increasing militancy of the protest movements (the Weathermen, the Black Panthers) had tried the public's patience and created the demand for a return to civil society and respect for its governing institutions. Nixon, a protégé of the moderate Eisenhower but also the prosecutor of Alger Hiss, seemed well equipped to combine "the reforming spirit with the conservative ideal." And his presidency initially seemed to pursue this objective. In 1969, Kevin Phillips, the most gifted

ANTHONY RUSSO



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

strategist in Nixon's first campaign, recognized the need for Burkean compromise. Since "the emerging Republican majority," as Phillips called it, was sure to be built on the party's cooptation of Southern conservatives and on the frustrations of restive white ethnics, some of whom were attracted to the provocations of the segregationist George Wallace, it was all the more important that "Democratic liberalism" remain "a vital and creative force in modern politics … injecting a needed leavening of humanism into the middle-class realpolitik of the new Republican coalition."

Of course it didn't happen. Why not? A big reason was Nixon himself. Rather than reconciling the two strains of conservatism, he played them against each other, sometimes strategically, sometimes cynically, sometimes paranoically, always chaotically. He perpetuated civil rights initiatives in the North, but then tried to appease white Southerners with archconservative Supreme Court appointees. Even as Nixon's most inspired cabinet choice, Moynihan, proposed a dramatic program for transferring cash directly to the poor, Nixon planted Donald Rumsfeld in the Office of Economic Opportunity, with instructions to dismantle it. In foreign policy, Nixon sent equally mixed messages. His overtures to the Soviet Union and China angered the right; his secret bombing of Cambodia inflamed the left. His legacy would be "the politics of polarization."

The polarization climaxed with Watergate. That cluster of White House crimes, once uncovered and prosecuted, gave conservatives the ideal occasion to reassert their role as guardians of social order. It was, after all, conservatives—most notably Burnham in *Congress and the American Tradition*—who had been inveighing for years against the destabilizing dangers of overreaching "Caesarist" presidents. Burnham was incensed when Nixon invoked "executive privilege" to evade congressional inquiry into "[t]he shoddy little trail of this pipsqueak Watergate business."

But the new generation of movement intellectuals interpreted Watergate differently. Just as liberals suspicious of Bill Clinton rallied around him during his impeachment, so Nixon's critics on the right defended him during Watergate. The true culprit, they decided, wasn't Nixon. It was the dark liberal forces arrayed against him. A "long term change in the equation of political power," Jeffrey Hart theorized in *National Review*, had placed the president at the mercy of "the federal bureaucracy," which, "though nominally part of the 'executive branch,' actually operates with considerable autonomy." But this "long term" change appeared to have happened overnight, with the election of the first president who had ties to the right. Hart also identified a second culprit, the "liberal-left bias of the major media."

The argument that political power emanated from an alliance of liberal government bureaucrats and a sympathetic press became the favored theme in the movement's next phase, elaborated in neopopulist books like Phillips's *Mediacracy*, Patrick J. Buchanan's *Conservative Votes, Liberal Victories*, and William A. Rusher's *The Making of a New Majority*. In assessing the burgeoning literature of "New Right" ideology, Jeane Kirkpatrick detected a unifying set of beliefs she found delusional:

> Among these are the idea that there exists in the electorate a hidden conservative majority; that the social division with the greatest potential political significance is not that between "haves" and "have-nots" but between the liberal elite and everybody else; that a realignment of the parties into two ideologically homogeneous groups is both desirable and likely; that the Republican party may not prove an effective institutional channel for the expression of truly conservative politics and should perhaps be abandoned; and that the principal obstacles to the conservative cause are the nation's media monopolies through whose "distorting lens" is filtered "almost every scrap of information Americans receive of their national government, its programs, policies, and personalities."

It was back to civil war, with some of the most intense skirmishes waged inside the GOP. Buchanan and Rusher, in particular, "were offended by the continuing presence in the Republican Party of a liberal minority which, ideologically speaking, belonged on the other side," Kirkpatrick noted. So preoccupied with doctrinal purity, however, New Right analysts missed the real meaning of the country's rightward drift, which had almost nothing to do with movement ideology. It was true that "a large majority of American adults are conservative," Kirkpatrick acknowledged, but in the classic, not movement sense, since "they are attached to the existing society and will support it against challenges to its legitimacy."

The Burkean moment was dissipating, and not only because of New Right populists. In 1975, the same year Phillips's, Buchanan's, and Rusher's manifestos all were published, Irving Kristol, the one-time elegist of the non-ideological "reforming spirit," identified a "new class" of liberal enemies. They were "not much interested in money but are keenly interested in power," Kristol wrote. "Power for what? Well, the power to shape our civilization—a power, which, in a capitalist system, is supposed to reside in the free market. The 'new class' wants to see much of this power redistributed to government, where *they* will then have a major say in how it is exercised." And who, exactly, populated this new class? "[S]cientists, teachers and educational administrators, journalists and others in the communication industries, psychologists, social workers, those lawyers and doctors who make their careers in the expanding public sector, city planners, the staffs of the larger foundations, the upper levels of the government bureaucracy."

This formulation mirrored "the antinomianism and anti-institutionalism" Bell had attributed to the countercultural left. The right, it appeared, was nursing its own version of anti-Americanism. In fact, it had been festering for many years. As Garry Wills, who broke with the movement in the 1970s but continued to call himself a conservative, observed: "The right wing in America is stuck with the paradox of holding a philosophy of 'conserving' an actual order it does not want to conserve."

The attack on the "new class," rooted in cultural hostility, dominated movement conservatism for the next 30 years, up through the administration of George W. Bush. On one side, as Rusher described it, were "businessmen, manufacturers, hard-hats, blue-collar workers, and farmers." On the other: "a liberal verbalist elite (the dominant media, the major foundations and research institutions, the educational establishment, the federal and state bureaucracies) and a semipermanent welfare constituency."

The great tribune of this new polarity was Ronald Reagan, with his denunciations of "big government" and the Cadillac-driving "welfare queens" it supported and his devotion (with urging from Kristol) to supply-side economics. The New Right was not only anti-Burkean. For all its populist enthusiasms, it reached back to the plutocratic Old Right of the Depression years, when businessmen had opposed federal assis-

ANTHONY RUSSO



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tance to the jobless because (as William E. Leuchtenburg summarized the argument in his book *The Perils of Prosperity*) "the suffering of the unemployed was not the product of an economic breakdown but was the direct result of their moral infirmity."

As Reagan's first term approached its end, it "has achieved as yet hardly anything in bringing the most rapidly growing domestic programs under control," Nathan Glazer concluded, after examining the available budget data. There was a reason nothing was done: The untouched programs benefited the "Reagan Democrats" who had been wooed in 1980 with the pledge that "insurance programs" like Social Security and Medicare would not be touched. The boom had been lowered in only one place: "The advocates of the poor play no role in this administration," Glazer found. "From this fact one can conclude that a certain blindness to their problems at best, and a positive malice at worst, animates the administration's policies." So much for the Beaconsfield position.

With Reagan, the argument between realism and revanchism all but ended. The revanchists had won. They consolidated their power during the 1990s when Republicans spent the better part of Bill Clinton's two terms trying to delegitimize him, even as he collaborated with them "to end welfare as we know it." The movement's new Danton, Newt Gingrich, who became speaker of the House in 1995, proposed "reforms"—"term limits" for representatives, the purging of moderates from committee chairmanships—that would have mystified conservative thinkers, such as Burnham and Kendall, who had contended that Congress's strength derived in large part from its institutional traditions.

The right, which for so long had deplored the politics of "class warfare," had become the most adept practitioners of that same politics. They had not only abandoned Burke. They had become inverse Marxists, placing loyalty to the movement—the Reagan Revolution—above their civic responsibilities. In 1995, the time of Gingrich's ascendancy, Kristol buoyantly spelled out the terms of revanchist strategy: "American conservatism is a *movement*, a popular movement, not a faction within any political party. Though, inevitably, most conservatives vote Republican, they are not party loyalists and the party has to woo them to win votes. This movement is issue oriented. It will happily meld with the Republican party if the party is 'right' on the issues; if not, it will walk away." By this calculus, all the obligations flow in only one direction. Parties are accountable to movement purists, while purists incur no reciprocal debt. They determine the "right" position, and the party's job is to advance it. Kristol does not consider whether purists might be expected to maneuver at all or even to modify their views—for the good not only of the party but also the larger polity.

Kristol went on, in this essay, to extol the contributions of two movement subgroups, the neoconservatives and the evangelicals. It was of course this alliance that most fervently supported George W. Bush during his two terms and remains most loyal to him today.

By their lights, they are right to do so. Bush, so often labeled a traitor to conservative principles, was in fact more steadfastly devoted to them than any of his Republican predecessors—including Ronald Reagan. Few on the right acknowledge this today, for obvious reasons. But not so long ago many did. At his peak, following September 11, Bush commanded the loyalties of every major faction of the Republican Party. The big central domestic proposal of his first term, the $1.3 trillion tax cut, extended Reagan's massive "tax reform" from the 1980s. Shortly before the Iraq invasion, Martin Anderson, Reagan's top domestic policy adviser, told Bill Keller (writing in *The New York Times Magazine*) that Bush was unmistakably Reagan's heir. "On taxes, on education, it was the same. On Social Security, Bush's position was exactly what Reagan always wanted and talked about in the '70s," Anderson said. "I just can't think of any major policy issue on which Bush was different." The prime initiative of Bush's second term, the attempt to privatize Social Security, drew directly on movement scripture: Milton Friedman denounced the "compulsory annuities" of Social Security in *Capitalism and Freedom*. Buckley noted the advantages of "voluntary" accounts in his early manifesto, *Up From Liberalism*. So did Barry Goldwater during his presidential campaign in 1964. Bush went further than Reagan, too, in the war he waged against the federal bureaucracy. And his attacks on the "liberal-left bias of the major media" were the most aggressive since Nixon's.

And then there was Iraq, the event that shaped Bush's presidency and, by most accounts, brought both him and the movement to ruin. It was also the event most at odds with classic conservative thinking. It is customary even now to say that the architects of the Iraq occupation failed because they naïvely placed too much faith in democracy. In fact, the problem was just the opposite. So contemptuous of the actual requirements of civil society at home, Bush's war planners gave no serious thought to how difficult it might be to create such a society in a distant land with a vastly different history. Those within the administration who tried to make this case were marginalized or removed from power.

In one of his prescient early writings, *The Vindication of the English Constitution*, a pamphlet published in 1835, the very young Disraeli reviewed the parallel democratizing experiments of his own time. In every nation where democracy had flourished, Disraeli observed, the rule of law was already embedded in social custom. This was why America had easily made the transition from a colonial protectorate to an independent constitutional society, while South American nations had not. Democracy was the fruit, not the precondition, of civil order. "Political institutions, founded on abstract rights and principles, are mere nullities," Disraeli wrote. Europe, too, had its predemocratic places where "a comparative civilisation had been obtained under the influence of a despotic priesthood. And these are the regions to which it is thought fit suddenly to apply the institutions which regulate the civil life of Yorkshire and of Kent!"

In the end, movement conservatives got the war they wanted—both at home and abroad. It ended, at last, with the 2008 election, and the emergence of a president who seems more thoroughly steeped in the principles of Burkean conservatism than any significant thinker or political figure on the right.

What our politics has consistently demanded of its leaders, if they are to ascend to the status of disinterested statesmen, is not the assertion but rather the renunciation of ideology. And the only ideology one can meaningfully renounce is one's own. Liberals did this a generation ago when they shed the programmatic "New Politics" of the left and embraced instead a broad majoritarianism. Now it is time for conservatives to repudiate movement politics and recover their honorable intellectual and political tradition. At its best, conservatism has served the vital function of clarifying our shared connection to the past and of giving articulate voice to the normative beliefs Americans have striven to maintain even in the worst of times. There remains in our politics a place for an authentic conservatism—a conservatism that seeks not to destroy but to conserve. ◆



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# This Won't Hurt a Bit

*Health care reform for dummies.*

JONATHAN COHN

At first blush, the findings of a study group called the Committee on the Costs of Medical Care might not seem particularly surprising. It's no longer news that millions of American families face financial ruin or physical catastrophe because they have no way to pay medical bills. Nor is it a great revelation that, as a committee staff member put it, "[v]ery few of these families are indigent in the accepted meaning of the word. They have a home, they buy their own food and clothing and pay their doctor's bills in ordinary illness." But it's not the novelty of the committee's findings that makes them so compelling. It's the timing. The report appeared in 1932.

It was the culmination of a five-year study, sponsored by a group of philanthropies, designed to provide the first comprehensive survey of health care spending in the United States. Back then, medicine was just entering what we now consider the modern era. Thanks to anesthesia, the sanitary method, and other innovations, health care had suddenly gotten a lot more effective—and a lot more expensive. For the first time, worrying about illness inevitably meant worrying about paying doctors and hospitals—a situation, the committee knew, that wouldn't go away after the Great Depression.

The committee's report was pretty big news. And, to the liberals then serving in Franklin Roosevelt's new administration, the response was obvious: The United States should follow the lead of Germany and create a national insurance system for medical care. Everybody would pay a premium in the form of taxes; the government would then pay everybody's medical expenses, drawing the money from the collected premiums. The New Dealers perceived national health insurance as a logical extension of what they were trying to do with Social Security: insulate people from the whims of the free market and the full fury of chance. They wanted to save capitalism from its own failures, which in this case meant making sure nobody would become indigent just because he or she had the misfortune to get sick.

FDR ultimately decided against pushing national health insurance, deeming it an unacceptable political risk. Two generations later, the job remains unfinished, only now our health-care crisis is a lot more complicated. One thing, however, has changed for the better. Unlike in 1932, there is today broad agreement that the system needs fixing. Perhaps nothing better symbolizes this consensus than the existence of a coalition called "Divided We Fail," whose members include longtime health reform advocates like the Service Employees International Union and longtime opponents like the Business Roundtable.

As a result, the prospects for sweeping changes to our health care system seem brighter than at any time in recent history. But the consensus is as fragile as it is broad. While the environment might now be conducive to bold changes, such political moments can prove maddeningly ephemeral. Once the squabbling over details begins, the obstructionists will get louder. National health insurance, they will vow, is a form of socialism—a charge they deployed during the New Deal and in every health care debate since.

But, just as the critics reach back to history to formulate their offensive, proponents of reform can find ammunition there, too. They must reprise the arguments for reform that were offered during the 1930s—and explain why they have only grown more urgent in the past few decades. Moreover, just as New Dealers were willing to take what they could get—to settle for imperfect but politically tenable programs rather than hold out for more ambitious measures and risk ending up with nothing—reform advocates may have to accept proposals that come up short of their ideal solution. Finally, they must press the case that, in the best New Deal tradition, health care reform isn't an effort to chip away at capitalism—but rather a bid to save it.

For much of the twentieth century, it looked like we were well on our way toward making health care affordable for all. By the late 1920s, patients weren't the only ones suffering because they couldn't pay medical bills. Hospitals were struggling, too, as their wards filled up with nonpaying patients or simply remained empty. And, since the government wasn't rising to the challenge, they decided to address it themselves by creating the first modern insurance plans—which eventually evolved into the Blue Cross system, on which U.S. health insurance remains based today.

The hospital plans focused on recruiting groups of employees, since that made the insurance math work. (Once you had a sufficiently large group of workers, you were basically guaranteed that premiums from the relatively healthy majority would cover the high medical expenses of the small minority with serious health problems.) But they soon started selling some policies on an individual basis, too. They generally made the policies available to anybody who could afford the relatively reasonable premiums, even to people with known health problems, in order to create a larger class of paying customers.

With reinforcement from the government—which, among other things, decided to make employer-sponsored health insurance tax-deductible—the system became entrenched. It was good for employers, who started paying for their workers' health benefits as a way to cement their loyalty and win labor peace; it was good for employees, who had access to affordable coverage; and it was good for doctors and hospitals, who got a steadier, more reliable stream of payments for services. It was also good for opponents of national health insurance, who cited the success of Blue Cross to validate their opinion.

But this was not a system established to protect individuals from financial risk, at least not primarily. It was, instead, a system created to make money for doctors and hospitals—and, subsequently, to give employers a relatively affordable way of placating workers. As a result, the guarantee of protection it offered Americans—not all of them, but most of them—turned out to be fleeting.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

By the 1970s, the cost of medicine was going through the roof, right at the time that foreign competition began to crush U.S. manufacturers. Soon the calculus for all employers began to change. Whereas before it had been in their obvious financial interest to be generous about employee health insurance, it was now in their obvious financial interest to be stingy. The steady rise in employer-sponsored insurance halted and began, inevitably, to reverse itself. Insurance products had changed, too, as the old non-profits run by hospitals gave way to commercial insurers primarily interested in making money. Instead of charging everybody the same "community rate," they screened for people in good health, charging higher rates for—or simply excluding—those with histories of anything from hay fever to cancer.

At one key historical juncture, back when these problems were first emerging, the federal government intervened to address them. It happened right after President Lyndon Johnson won reelection in 1964, bringing with him huge Democratic majorities. Together, they created Medicare and Medicaid, offering coverage to the elderly and the poor, two groups that were disconnected from the workplace and thus still struggled to get insurance. The effort succeeded: Medicaid led to large gains in health among the poor, while Medicare vastly reduced poverty among the elderly. But, while the architects of these programs hoped they'd be a stepping stone to national health insurance, the rise of conservative politics, with its signature hatred of the state, squelched that hope.

In the absence of further government intervention, the insurance system deteriorated. The result is the situation we have today. At any one time, according to the most recent census figures, about 46 million people, or roughly 15 percent of Americans, have no health insurance. Conservatives note that this is just a snapshot in time, that very few people actually lack insurance for the entire year. But the fact that people are constantly moving in and out of coverage is not a sign of our health care system's strength; it's a sign of its weakness. Another way to look at the numbers is that, over the course of a two-year period, more than one-fourth of the population will go without health insurance for some time.

And it's not as if having insurance guarantees financial protection. Many people have coverage with gaps that expose them to onerous medical bills. According to a recent study conducted by researchers from the Commonwealth Fund and published in the peer-reviewed journal *Health Affairs*, in 2007 some 25 million Americans *with* health insurance were "underinsured," meaning they had high out-of-pocket expenses. Nearly half reported trouble paying bills, and more than half said they went without appropriate medical care—whether it was choosing not to fill prescriptions, skipping doctor visits when sick, or failing to get recommended tests and treatment.

Nor are all, or even most, of the people without adequate health insurance among society's most destitute. The majority in the Commonwealth Fund study were in working families. And a substantial minority were middle class, with household incomes of more than $40,000 per year. "Insurance erosion has spread up the income distribution well into the middle-income range," the authors concluded—reprising the very warning that researchers had made back in the 1930s.

Alas, that's not all that's wrong with U.S. health care today. The main reason health insurance coverage is presently declining is that it's gotten so expensive, with the nation's overall bill consistently rising faster than inflation. This is the product of many factors, chief among them the development of ever-more-powerful technology and the huge demand for it. If the expense of medical care simply rose at a more reasonable rate, we'd still have a problem of people without adequate insurance. But the problem wouldn't be getting worse—or adding to the financial burden that falls on employers and government.

To be fair, there's no iron law of economics that says we cannot choose to spend 16 percent of our gross domestic product on health care—or more. But it has become apparent that we're not getting much for all of this extra money. While U.S. medicine excels in certain areas, like breast cancer treatment, it lags in others, like ongoing diabetes care. On the whole, the data suggest that the United States does not have health care outcomes superior to countries like France, Germany, or Switzerland—all of which have universal coverage yet spend substantially less money.

Some defenders of the status quo argue that the high cost of U.S. health care is the price for our unparalleled record of medical innovation. But it's direct government spending on research, through the National Institutes of Health, that generates the scientific breakthroughs necessary for miracle cures. And, while the drug and device industries perform the necessary work of turning these breakthroughs into treatments, they also churn out products that turn out not to be innovative at all. As writers like Shannon Brownlee and Merrill Goozner have documented persuasively, we pay for a great deal of "over-treatment"—much of it in the form of high-tech cures that don't really help and sometimes hurt patients.

Our health care crisis, then, is really several, intertwined crises. If people didn't get so much inappropriate or wasteful care, they might not run up such big individual bills. If they didn't run up such big bills, insurance premiums wouldn't cost so much. If insurance didn't cost so much, more people could pay for it. It makes sense to think about these problems together and, if possible, to work on solving them simultaneously.

To many activists and experts on the left, one solution in particular seems uniquely capable of having such a broad impact: single-payer health insurance. The term "single-payer" reflects the fact that, in the purist form of such a system, the government is responsible for everybody's medical bills. In practice, though, single-payer systems usually reserve at least some role for private insurance.

Advocates of single-payer systems complain frequently that the mainstream political debate doesn't give their idea the attention it deserves. They are right. Public insurance programs enjoy huge economies of scale; they don't fritter away money on profits or efforts to skim healthier patients from the population. When it comes to billing, they tend to be a lot simpler than, say, a system with dozens of competing insurance plans. All insurance systems require providers to file a lot of paperwork; single-payer systems, though, require just one set. The centralized power of single-payer systems also gives them unparalleled sway over not just the amount of money they pay but how they dole it out; with that kind of leverage, they can push the medical system toward making key improvements in quality.

Conservative critics of single-payer raise the perfectly respectable question of whether a government program could really wield such power judiciously. But it's telling that, when Taiwan set out to create a universal coverage system for its newly prosperous society a few years ago, it carefully studied schemes from around the world—and settled on a single-payer system, because it seemed to deliver the best, most equitable med-


LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ical care at the lowest price. Today, experts say Taiwan has one of the world's most efficient, convenient, and effective health care systems.

In an ideal world, then, single-payer would almost certainly be the best option. But is it politically feasible? Single-payer advocates like to point out that Representative John Conyers has a single-payer bill in Congress with close to 100 co-sponsors. But many of those co-sponsors have signed on because, until now, it has been a cheap, meaningless way to win points with liberal interest groups. In the Senate, meanwhile, declared support for single-payer is virtually non-existent. Polling on the question is ambiguous, suggesting the public doesn't yet have a strong opinion about the single-payer option. But even now, as the country seems to be moving left, voters remain deeply skeptical of massive government programs.

That is why the present consensus among Washington reformers, starting with President Obama, leans toward a different set of reforms. Under these plans, most people with insurance would continue to get coverage the way they do now—through Medicaid, if they are poor, or through employer-sponsored insurance, if they have it. But, for those people who don't have insurance and for anybody not satisfied with their present arrangements, these reforms would create a third option: a purchasing cooperative, designed to mimic the system federal employees use, in which people could choose among a set of regulated insurance plans. The private insurers participating in this cooperative couldn't discriminate against people with pre-existing conditions by charging higher rates or excluding them altogether. Every plan would have to provide the same core benefits package, although insurers would be free to offer extra benefits as well. To make sure everybody could afford a policy, the government would offer subsidies, scaled to income. To finance these subsidies as well as the necessary expansions of Medicaid, the government would tap money available elsewhere in the budget, some of it from expiring Bush tax cuts, then raise additional revenue—by, among other things, requiring medium and large employers that don't offer coverage on their own to pay a tax.

The underlying premise of these proposals is caution, at least to the extent that even a tentative overhaul of health care costing well more than $100 billion per year can qualify as "cautious." In theory, most medium and large employers offering coverage would continue to do so, at least for the short term; that means people who had insurance they liked would, for the most part, get to keep it. Backers of these schemes have said they would create a quasi-independent, permanent commission—modeled on the Federal Reserve Board—to make key decisions, like what benefits all plans must cover. But they haven't been too specific about this board's powers, suggesting that it would be a pretty weak institution at first—lest the prospect of government making health care decisions scare off would-be supporters.

If this scheme works out as planned, private insurers would, in effect, operate as a public utility under the close watch of government regulators. But the insurance industry might not be that easy to regulate. That's why Obama and his allies have embraced an innovation first promoted by Jacob Hacker, a political scientist and health policy expert: the creation of a new public insurance program, which would provide good benefits and be available to anybody through the purchasing cooperative. Ideally, such a plan would be able to exert additional leverage over pricing and quality. And if the plan proved more efficient than its private competitors, over time it would attract so many people that it would evolve into a single-payer system by default. Still, the government wouldn't force anyone into it. And, because it wouldn't cover everybody, at least right away, it couldn't meddle with the same strength as a true single-payer system.

The common thread to these ideas is a clear desire to avoid politically troublesome disruptions. But the political virtue of these schemes is also their key policy weakness. Creating a truly efficient health insurance system—one that minimized waste and forced the medical system to act in ways that improved quality—necessarily involves precisely the disruptions today's reformers want to avoid. It's hardly surprising, for example, that a recent Congressional Budget Office report predicted that reforms like the ones under discussion would produce only modest savings in the next few years.

That is why schemes like Obama's frequently earn derision, not just from single-payer advocates but also from critics on the right who think it's wrong to expand coverage without first fixing the health care system's other problems. Typical was a September *Newsweek* column by Robert Samuelson, in which he suggested that calls for universal coverage were "utterly wrong" and urged policymakers to focus instead on the "unglamorous and probably unpopular" work of forcing down the consumption of expensive medical services.

The desire to prioritize cost and quality over coverage is understandable. It's also misguided. Critics like Samuelson fail to appreciate the difficulty of fixing anything in a fractured insurance system like the one we have today. To take one obvious example, a key to promoting efficiency is continuous care—that is, making sure people see the same doctors over time—since that tends to cut down on wasteful duplication of services and misdiagnoses. But a trademark of the U.S. health insurance system is its volatility. If people aren't moving in and out of coverage altogether, they're moving in and out of different insurance plans, which often means switching doctors, too.

More important, those critics who think coverage should come second fail to grasp—much like some single-payer advocates do—that the probable alternative to a plan like Obama's is doing nothing, since it's even harder to enact cost-control reforms, many of which offend particular special interest groups, without the support of a public that thinks it will gain something in the form of guaranteed coverage. No, the plans now on the table in Washington may not slash costs and improve quality right away. But they will make progress. And that may be as good as it gets.

Then again, many critics on the right would be perfectly happy with the status quo. Yes, tens of millions of Americans can't pay for medical care because they lack adequate insurance; yes, many of these people will suffer. That's the price of having a functioning market economy, they'll say, one that inevitably imposes some pain as it creates prosperity for everybody.

But the choice between a humane society and a productive society is a false one. And the proof is in history. Conservatives made the same complaint about the New Deal, insisting that Social Security and other government interventions would destroy American innovation and lead to socialism. But the New Dealers weren't undermining capitalism. They were saving it from shortcomings that, left to fester, might well have destroyed it from within.

Today, capitalism's most serious shortcoming is a lack of affordable health care; once again, government intervention is the only realistic remedy. The New Dealers anticipated this problem, but they left it to future generations. Seventy years later, the time has finally come to solve it. ◆



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"There is no disagreement that we need action by our government, a recovery plan that will help to jumpstart the economy."

—PRESIDENT-ELECT BARACK OBAMA, JANUARY 9, 2009

# With all due respect Mr. President, that is not true.

Notwithstanding reports that all economists are now Keynesians and that we all support a big increase in the burden of government, we the undersigned do not believe that more government spending is a way to improve economic performance. More government spending by Hoover and Roosevelt did not pull the United States economy out of the Great Depression in the 1930s. More government spending did not solve Japan's "lost decade" in the 1990s. As such, it is a triumph of hope over experience to believe that more government spending will help the U.S. today. To improve the economy, policymakers should focus on reforms that remove impediments to work, saving, investment and production. Lower tax rates and a reduction in the burden of government are the best ways of using fiscal policy to boost growth.

Burton Abrams, *Univ. of Delaware*
Douglas Adie, *Ohio University*
Ryan Amacher, *Univ. of Texas at Arlington*
Don Bellante, *Univ. of South Florida*
James Bennett, *George Mason University*
Bruce Benson, *Florida State University*
Mark Bils, *Univ. of Rochester*
Alberto Bisin, *New York University*
Cecil Bohanon, *Ball State University*
Michele Boldrin, *Washington University in St. Louis*
Michael Bordo, *Rutgers University*
Samuel Bostaph, *Univ. of Dallas*
James Buchanan, *Nobel laureate*
Henry Butler, *Northwestern University*
William Butos, *Trinity College*
Bryan Caplan, *George Mason University*
V.V. Chari, *Univ. of Minnesota*
Barry Chiswick, *Univ. of Illinois at Chicago*
J.R. Clark, *Univ. of Tennessee at Chattanooga*
Gian Luca Clementi, *New York University*
John Cochrane, *Univ. of Chicago*
John Cogan, *Hoover Institution, Stanford University*
John Coleman, *Duke University*
Mario Crucini, *Vanderbilt University*
Christopher Culp, *Univ. of Chicago*
Clarence Deitsch, *Ball State University*
James Dorn, *Towson University*
John Egger, *Towson University*
Kenneth Elzinga, *Univ. of Virginia*
Paul Evans, *Ohio State University*
Eugene Fama, *Univ. of Chicago*
W. Ken Farr, *Georgia College & State University*
Murray Frank, *Univ. of Minnesota*
Rick Geddes, *Cornell University*
Aaron Gellman, *Northwestern University*
Michael Gibbs, *Univ. of Chicago*
Richard Gordon, *Penn State University*
Paul Gregory, *Univ. of Houston*
Earl Grinols, *Baylor University*
Daniel Gropper, *Auburn University*
Steve Hanke, *Johns Hopkins*
Ronald Heiner, *George Mason University*
David Henderson, *Hoover Institution, Stanford University*
Gailen Hite, *Columbia University*
John Howe, *Univ. of Missouri, Columbia*
Jason Johnston, *Univ. of Pennsylvania*
Boyan Jovanovic, *New York University*
Jonathan Karpoff, *Univ. of Washington*
Nicholas Kiefer, *Cornell University*
Daniel Klein, *George Mason University*
Deepak Lal, *UCLA*
Robert Lawson, *Auburn University*
David Levine, *Washington University in St. Louis*
Dean Lillard, *Cornell University*
Zheng Liu, *Emory University*
Glenn MacDonald, *Washington University in St. Louis*
Deirdre McCloskey, *Univ. of Illinois at Chicago*
John McDermott, *Univ. of South Carolina*
Roger Meiners, *Univ. of Texas at Arlington*
Allan Meltzer, *Carnegie Mellon University*
Jeffrey Miron, *Harvard University*
Andrea Moro, *Vanderbilt University*
Andrew Morriss, *Univ. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*
Michael Munger, *Duke University*
Kevin Murphy, *Univ. of Southern California*
Richard Muth, *Emory University*
Charles Nelson, *Univ. of Washington*
Lee Ohanian, *UCLA*
Lydia Ortega, *San Jose State University*
Donald Parsons, *George Washington University*
Sam Peltzman, *Univ. of Chicago*
Christopher Phelan, *Univ. of Minnesota*
Gordon Phillips, *Univ. of Maryland*
Tomasz Piskorski, *Columbia University*
William Poole, *Univ. of Delaware*
Barry Poulson, *Univ. of Colorado at Boulder*
Edward Prescott, *Nobel laureate*
Adriano Rampini, *Duke Universiety*
Eric Rasmusen, *Indiana University*
Mario Rizzo, *New York University*
Richard Roll, *UCLA*
Charles Rowley, *George Mason University*
Juan Rubio-Ramirez, *Duke University*
Roy Ruffin, *Univ. of Houston*
Kevin Salyer, *Univ. of California, Davis*
Pavel Savor, *Univ. of Pennsylvania*
Ronald Schmidt, *Univ. of Rochester*
William Shughart II, *Univ. of Mississippi*
Vernon Smith, *Nobel laureate*
Houston Stokes, *Univ. of Illinois at Chicago*
Henry Thompson, *Auburn University*
Edward Tower, *Duke University*
Leo Troy, *Rutgers University*
David Tuerck, *Suffolk University*
Charlotte Twight, *Boise State University*
Charles Upton, *Kent State University*
T. Norman Van Cott, *Ball State University*
Richard Vedder, *Ohio University*
Richard Wagner, *George Mason University*
Lawrence White, *Univ. of Missouri at St. Louis*
Walter Williams, *George Mason University*
Dennis Wilson, *Western Kentucky University*
Huizhong Zhou, *Western Michigan University*

CATO INSTITUTE

PAID FOR BY THE CATO INSTITUTE, WWW.CATO.ORG

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# *Pravda* on the Potomac

*Russian propaganda descends on Washington.*

JAMES KIRCHICK

Ramzan Kadyrov, one would assume, is hardly the sort of man the Russian government would want to show off to a group of foreign dignitaries. The Moscow-appointed president of Chechnya has been accused of deploying his several-thousand-man-strong personal militia—since absorbed into the Chechen government—to torture and murder his opponents, and many suspect that he played a role in the 2006 murder of Anna Politkovskaya, an investigative journalist who exposed Russia's brutal repression of separatists. Kadyrov, who inherited rule over the erstwhile rebel province after his father was assassinated in 2004, has praised Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin as a "beauty" who should be made "president for life." And he is a pugilist, literally and rhetorically: A boxer, he invited Mike Tyson to visit the Chechen capital of Grozny in 2005, praising the convicted rapist and ear-eater's "fists of iron." "I will be killing as long as I live," Kadyrov once boasted to a reporter.

Nonetheless, the 32-year-old Kadyrov was one of a number of Russian heavyweights with whom Western journalists, academics, and think-tank experts from around the world were invited to meet in September during a conference sponsored by the government's official news service, RIA Novosti. The gathering, known as the "Valdai Discussion Club," took place just a few weeks after Russia's invasion of Georgia, and among those present were Jonathan Steele, onetime Moscow correspondent for *The Guardian*; Anatol Lieven of the New America Foundation; *International Herald Tribune* editorial page editor Serge Schmemann; and Robert Blackwill, a U.S. envoy to Iraq and ambassador to India under George W. Bush. The group was treated to meetings with Russian counterparts, a visit to Europe's biggest mosque, tours of a Cossack village, a jaunt to the seaside resort town (and 2014 Winter Olympics site) of Sochi, and bull sessions with a series of high-level Russian officials, the highlight of which was a three-hour question-and-answer session with Prime Minister Putin himself.

The intent of the annual conference is to wine, dine, and flatter the overseas VIPs into a certain sympathy for the Russian perspective. But if the Kremlin had told Kadyrov, whose bushy red beard and thick physique lend him the demeanor of a high school wrestling coach, to tone it down, he hadn't received the memo. "This guy's a lunatic," Marshall Goldman, a longtime adviser to American presidents on Russia and a regular participant in the Valdai Club meetings, says of the former separatist leader. Goldman reports that Kadyrov spoke of Chechnya as a "zoo" and its inhabitants as "animals," and said his only regret was that he didn't murder the rebel leader responsible for the bombing that killed his father "with his own hands."

Kadyrov was hardly the only figure at the gathering to offer an unvarnished Russian take on current affairs. Also on the schedule were Sergei Bagapsh and Eduard Kokoity, the presidents, respectively, of the separatist Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both of whom, according to Goldman, called Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, a "drug addict" and "unbalanced mentally." In the much-anticipated meeting with Putin, a participant asked about the use of "disproportionate force in South Ossetia," to which the prime minister delivered a tirade in which he asked whether "it was necessary to wipe away the bloody sniffles," and inquired, "What did you expect us to do? Brandish a penknife?"

The Valdai Club, inaugurated in 2004, is part of a multipronged effort by the Kremlin to improve American perceptions of Russia. These attitudes have suffered a precipitous decline over the past several years as Vladimir Putin transmogrified from the promising inheritor of Boris Yeltsin's benign, if chaotic, rule into a bold autocrat. Reports on Russia in the Western press these days are mainly about the closure of independent TV stations and newspapers, violent crackdowns on journalists and human rights activists, and restraints on opposition parties so onerous that the country is effectively a one-party state. August's war with Georgia only worsened Russia's already damaged image.

The new p.r. effort attempts to undermine all that. Gone is the international brotherhood propaganda of old: Today's p.r. offensive is flashy, sophisticated, and far more subtle—not to mention expensive—emphasizing the supposed commonality of Russo-American national interests. The Russians have begun purchasing the services of high-priced international consulting and lobbying firms and expanding the reach of their state-funded media abroad. You can see the effort conspicuously in the monthly insert in *The Washington Post*, "Russia Beyond the Headlines." Produced by the government-owned newspaper *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, it's a bit of *Pravda* folded in behind the sports section of the Washington daily: One can do nothing but chuckle at headlines like "Georgian bombs rained on us" or "Diverse parties make for an interesting election."

This from a country that has bullied its neighbors, cracked down on internal dissent, and dispatched naval ships to Cuban and Venezuelan waters. In its attempt to persuade a cynical American audience of its good intentions, Russia must sell a rotten apple by pretending it's foie gras. It would be a worrying effort—if only the Russians did it better.

For the past four years, Russia has been building its global media and public relations presence. In 2005, the government established Russia Today, a worldwide news channel that broadcasts in English, Arabic, and Spanish. With its often virulent anti-Americanism, worshipful portrayal of Russian leaders, and comical production values, the station, which has over 90 million viewers, can be relied upon to repeat Kremlin talking points. But while the station has pretensions to be a respected news outlet, it often can't help but revive the pettiness that was a distinctive feature of Soviet-era propaganda. A video clip on the station's website, for instance, shows Saakashvili chewing on the end of his tie while on a phone call; it's captioned "The nervous Georgian President revealed an odd little habit." The station also regularly features commentary from Alex Jones, the notorious American conspiracy theorist who in August apologized to Russia Today viewers for



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the Georgian invasion; an attack, he said, in fact perpetrated by "a private international military industrial complex" that had "taken over" the U.S. government.

But the real curtain-raiser for the new Russian p.r. campaign took place at the annual G-8 conference of industrialized democracies at St. Petersburg in 2006, where Russia celebrated its presidency of the organization. The pressure was especially high, as the Bush administration had made clear to Putin that the top-level confab would do little to change American views of Russia unless his government halted the persecution of political opponents and the independent media, and stopped rigging and canceling elections. "Russia has a choice to make," Dick Cheney declared in May 2006, two months before the conference. "And there is no question that a return to democratic reform in Russia will generate further success for its people and greater respect among fellow nations."

Democratic reform was evidently not what the Russians had in mind. But, to whitewash its increasing authoritarianism, the Kremlin did something it had never done before: It hired a Washington, D.C. communications firm to press its case. The same month Cheney was calling on Russia to reform, Ketchum Inc., a major p.r. outfit that represents Kodak, IBM, Nokia, and FedEx, won a $2 million contract to "pursue several communications activities to facilitate a relationship between Russia's Presidency of the G-8 and the media." (Ketchum shares the account with GPlus Europe, a London- and Brussels-based p.r. company owned by its parent firm, Omnicom.)

The G-8 meeting was set at Konstantinovsky Palace and Peterhof, eighteenth-century castles that once belonged to Peter the Great, and it served as a "three-day tutorial on Russia's revival," as *The Washington Post* described it. This was a time of rising oil prices and, thus, increasing Russian confidence in its ability to dictate the course of global events. But Ketchum eased the Russian bombast with a little Washington finesse: Twenty-five Ketchum employees headed to St. Petersburg, where they arranged interviews for reporters with senior Russian government leaders, established podcasts featuring Russian officials, and set up a webcast of the conference with the BBC. Ketchum later bragged that it "succeeded in helping … shift global views of Russia to recognize its more democratic nature"; the company won a "Silver Anvil" prize from the Public Relations Society of America and a *PRWeek* Global Campaign of the Year Award for its work.

The Russians were no doubt impressed, because in January 2007 they signed an $845,000, two-month contract with Ketchum and its lobbying subsidiary, The Washington Group, for "public relations counsel, lobbying and media relations support." (The account, which ended late last year when The Washington Group merged with another lobbying firm, was handled at one time by John O'Hanlon, a longtime fund-raiser for the Democratic Party. Today, Ketchum is in the process of hiring another lobbying firm to represent Russia's interests in Washington.) In August, Ketchum began providing media relations support for Gazprom, the Russian state energy company, to the tune of nearly $250,000 per month. According to *The Hill*, since 2006, Ketchum and The Washington Group have earned more than $7.5 million in fees from the Russian government.

Some of the effort is overtly political. In the midst of the conflict between Russia and Georgia, employees for The Washington Group, including former Republican congresswoman Susan Molinari, then CEO of the firm, contacted Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, her former colleague and ranking Republican member on the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, as well as staffers for Representative Joe Crowley and then-Senator Joe Biden, according to documents filed with the Department of Justice.

But Ketchum also spends a lot of time trying to soften up the press. Among many other press coups, Ketchum staffers have set up interviews with a high-level Russian government official for journalists like *The New Yorker* editor David Remnick, arranged a meeting between Gazprom executives and members of *The Wall Street Journal*'s editorial board, and traveled to Kennebunkport, Maine, for the 2007 "Lobster Summit" with Bush and Putin. In November 2007, Ketchum "[r]eached out to contacts at Time Warner" to lobby on behalf of Putin's becoming *Time* Magazine's "Person of the Year." Putin won.

Try as Ketchum might to claim credit for getting Putin's mug on the cover of *Time*, that particular coup likely had more to do with the Russian leader's role in reasserting the strength of the Russian state than it did with well-paid p.r. consultants. (In a piece describing why *Time* chose Putin, managing editor Richard Stengel reminded readers that "*Time*'s Person of the Year is not and never has been an honor.") And Ketchum certainly wasn't up to the task of digging Russia out of the p.r. ditch that was the Georgia war. International press coverage of the conflict was almost uniformly critical of Russia, while, thanks in part to the media savvy of the American-educated Saakashvili, Georgia received widespread sympathy.

Partly in response to that p.r. failure, Russia is extending its efforts further. In October, the dean of the international relations department of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Diplomatic Academy called for nothing less than the restoration of the Soviet-era propaganda bureau, one that would "restore the potential of the [Soviet-era] mechanism of foreign political propaganda which was completely destroyed in the 1990s," Russia expert Paul Goble reported on his blog. Certainly one of the more ham-handed elements of the p.r. effort was the establishment last year of the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation. The institute, which has a branch in New York City, was set up to critique the supposed deficits in American democracy. "Russia denies the Western community the exclusive right to determine what constitutes democracy," declared the government newspaper *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* about the institute.

But no matter how hard Russia tries, or how much money it spends, its flacks don't have much to write home to Moscow about. A month after Russia's Georgian adventure, President Bush cancelled a non-military nuclear cooperation agreement that he had sent to Congress for approval in May and pledged a $1 billion aid package to Georgia. And the public was no more sympathetic to the Russian point of view: During the war, a Rasmussen poll found that 59 percent of Americans considered the Russian invasion a threat to U.S. national security. And, according to a poll released last September by the German Marshall Fund of the United States, 58 percent of Americans support "provid[ing] security assistance for neighboring democracies like Ukraine and Georgia," and 84 percent are concerned about Russia's supply of armaments to the Middle East.

Changing public perceptions of a historic antagonist is a difficult task, but, even on more readily attainable goals, Russia has been unsuccessful. Reportedly, one of the key issues the Russians hired the Washington Group to lobby on is repeal of the Jackson-Vanik amendment. Passed in 1974 to protest Soviet restrictions on its Jewish population, the law denies favorable trade relations with non–free market countries that restrict emigration. Russia has met the emigration requirement since the early 1990s, and the United States waives it every year.



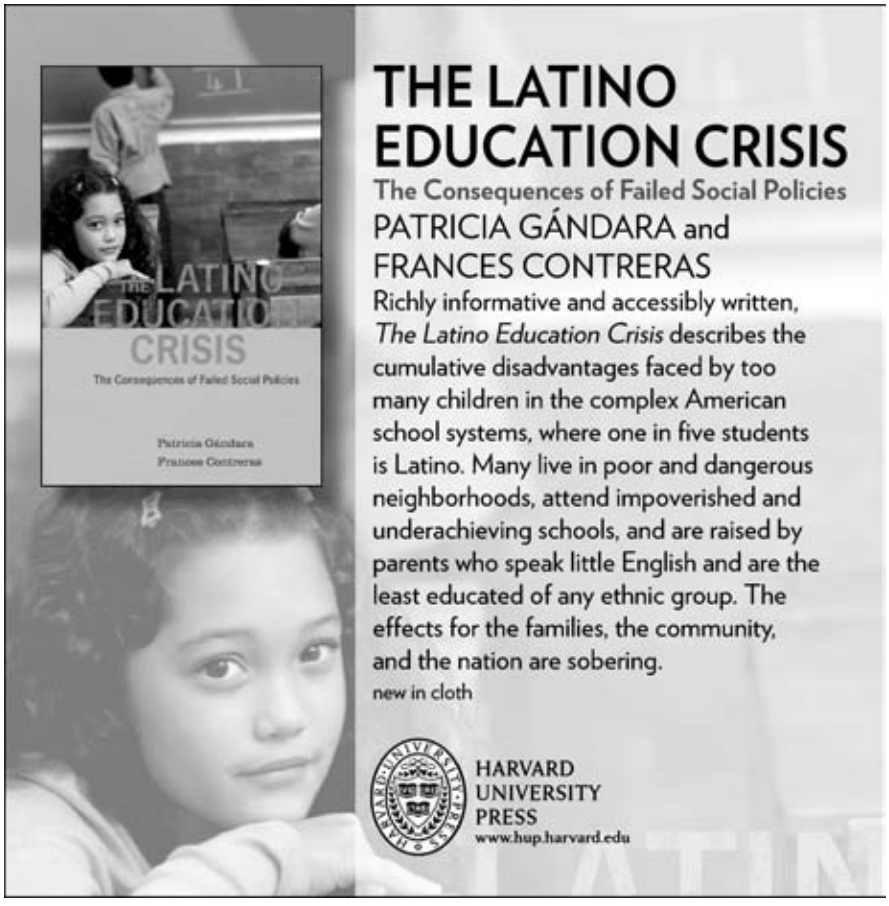
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Yet the existence of the amendment is a symbolic wound to the Russians, and one that, thus far, they have not been able to convince the United States to rescind.

Another way to judge the effectiveness of the Kremlin's attempt at *glasnost* is the response of American politicians. While some realists and liberals criticized John McCain's bold declaration that "[w]e are all Georgians," it was Barack Obama's initially equivocal response, blaming both sides for the crisis, that ultimately looked premature. Over the ensuing days, Obama shifted his position closer to McCain's skepticism of the Russian bear. Both presidential tickets supported extending NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia, a major source of tension between Russia and the West, and were highly critical of Putin's human rights abuses in their rhetoric on the trail. And, while Obama campaigned on a return to American "humility" in foreign policy, his appointment of Stanford University Professor Michael McFaul, a harsh critic of Kremlin human rights abuses and an outspoken advocate for NATO expansion and political liberalization in Russia, as senior director for Russian affairs on the National Security Council ought to upset Kremlin hardliners.

But the biggest stumbling block in Russia's self-laudatory campaign is clearly Russian leadership itself—as it has always been. Fifty years ago, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev banged his shoe at the United Nations and told the United States, "We will bury you." Today, Putin likens U.S. policy to the Third Reich and manipulates Europe's gas supply. On September 12—during Valdai—state television aired an Italian-produced documentary alleging that the United States government was complicit in the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. "All these things, they create an unfavorable impression in the West," says Oleg Kalugin, a former KGB general and propagandist. "And this is what the Russian current propaganda machine wants to rectify … to show Russia as solid, reliable, part of the Western world and interested in integration in the western world."

It's possible that there's a silver lining to Russia's new p.r. offensive. "It is a positive that the Russians care so much that they're going on and trying to look good," says Tom Simons, a former U.S. ambassador to Poland. But, as long as the Russians stoke anti-American sentiment at home, interfere violently in their "near-abroad," and parade around goons like Ramzan Kadyrov, they shouldn't expect to earn the warm feelings of the American people anytime soon. ◆



THE LATINO EDUCATION CRISIS
The Consequences of Failed Social Policies
PATRICIA GÁNDARA and FRANCES CONTRERAS
Richly informative and accessibly written, *The Latino Education Crisis* describes the cumulative disadvantages faced by too many children in the complex American school systems, where one in five students is Latino. Many live in poor and dangerous neighborhoods, attend impoverished and underachieving schools, and are raised by parents who speak little English and are the least educated of any ethnic group. The effects for the families, the community, and the nation are sobering.
new in cloth
HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
www.hup.harvard.edu

ROGER L. WOLLENBERG/UPI/LANDOV

"Required reading in this White House."
*—Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel*
THE NEW REPUBLIC




LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

## Stanley Kauffmann on Films

# HEROES AND PEOPLE

Edward Zwick's film *Defiance* is based on Nechama Tec's book of the same title. Tec told a wondrous factual story of World War II, a history so close to incredible that it is awesome. In Belarus in 1941, two young Jewish brothers named Bielski organized a life-saving mission for Jews that, after much hazard and suffering, rescued twelve hundred lives from the Holocaust. The principal means of salvation was the immense forests of the region. The Bielskis hid a community of Jews in those forests, defending them when necessary but mostly moving them, with school and hospital and supplies, from place to place for three years. It is an account of courage, born of desperation yet nonetheless magnificent.

This was an apt subject for Zwick. He has long shown an affinity for the epic—sagas of heroes that have historical import. The results have varied in quality. *Blood Diamond*, addressing the interplay of commerce and oppression in Sierra Leone, and *The Last Samurai*, depicting the end of an era in Japan, had problems; *Glory*, about a black regiment in the Union Army during the Civil War, was soul-shaking. In any case, it would seem that Zwick was ready to be overwhelmed by Tec's book. In the foreword that he wrote for its new paperbound edition, he says, "To read of the Bielski brothers and their fight to create a safe haven evokes in me something utterly primitive and deeply personal," and added, "Those of us who make films are forever searching for heroes." Here he found some.

The Bielski brothers were rough and ready types who (Tec writes) "belonged to the small minority of Jews who from the very beginning refused to become ghetto inmates. To elude the enemy they were constantly on the move." They saw that the Germans were murdering Jews almost methodically, and they knew that outright confrontation would be futile. The Bielskis also knew the Belorussian forests and that they could hide people there. They began to recruit people for their community—at one point they even raided a small ghetto and took the occupants along. Soon they had something like a shtetl in those deep woods, a mobile shtetl that could shift evasively when needed.

It is a story for which the term "gripping" is weak. But for film-makers it brought a burden. Zwick's screenplay virtually announces that he and Clayton Frohman, his co-writer, soon found that their love for the book had a steep cinematic price. The story is utterly absorbing, but it is not intrinsically dramatic. Zwick himself says it is the account of a "safe haven." Tec writes of Tuvia Bielski, the leader of the enterprise, "Refusing to become a victim, rejecting the role of avenger, Tuvia Bielski concentrated on gathering Jewish fugitives and protecting their lives." Tuvia himself said years later: "[The Germans] took anyone and killed them.... I wanted to save, not to kill."

Fighting and killing were inevitable along the way, but they were always, in an organic sense, peripheral. The center was this forest community of Jews, who were not a corps of resistance fighters: they were families hiding. Some of the men certainly helped in defense when the Germans attacked, but the story is more spiritually courageous than aggressive. These were people in flight, not in campaigns.

Zwick's film shows that he recognized this difference early on. He foresaw that, to give the story filmic vitality, he had to endow it with more action. He was aware, as he says, that "movies are ... reductionist" against complicated sources, yet apparently he also knew that he had taken on two jobs, not one. He had to preserve this story that he revered, yet he had to do it in a film that was not merely a static account of people who were hiding.

*DEFIANCE*
*Paramount*

*OF TIME AND THE CITY*
*Strand Releasing*

Every chance for action was then wrung dry. The Germans harass the Jewish group as much as they can, but in the film the battle scenes with Germans are much expanded from the book. The Bielski raids on peasants for food are extended. When a wolf attacks a girl who carries food, Zwick makes the feral most of it to liven the screen. When a German soldier is captured by the Jews, Zwick turns the community into a manic chorus. Tuvia and Zus blaze one day into a fistfight, and when the moment comes that Tuvia picks up a stone to brain his brother, he stops—as we know he will—just in time. (Zus leaves to join some Soviet partisans nearby, but ultimately returns.) Tuvia has an amour with a girl in the group, and, to dress the film, Zwick chooses a conventionally pretty one, then photographs her flatteringly. And the one scene in which she and her lover are seen in bed is bathed in a golden glow that seems catchpenny. Throughout, Zwick surrounds his unique central story with more familiar movie-action material.

Then there are the Bielski brothers themselves. Zwick felt that he had to purify Tuvia and Zus. (There are two younger brothers, but they are minor in

ANTHONY RUSSO



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the story.) Zwick himself has said, in a publicity piece, that Tuvia and Zus were "raised wild in the woods … casually violent, sexually predacious … at times murderous." He cleans them up considerably for wide popular acceptance. Thus he reduces the fascinating contrast between their true characters and the ennobling work that they did. We might understand that a film's limits in time and breadth enforced the simplification; still, this purging seems part of an acceptance mode.

The center of the picture is quite another matter. Paradoxically, *Defiance* is at its best when it is not trying to be a smash film—when it is not, in a kinetic sense, cinematic. The creation of that Jewish community and the commitment of its members are enthralling. Some of this effect comes from a series of small authentic performances. Some of it comes from the places where it all happens. (The exteriors were shot in a Lithuanian forest near the actual places.) Eduardo Serra, the cinematographer, who worked with Zwick on *Blood Diamond* (and who copied Vermeer's palette in *Girl With a Pearl Earring*), has transmuted that forest into a series of immense verdant caverns. He makes us understand why, through literature and folklore, forests have seemed magical. When snow comes, as it does in the film's time span, it seems no more than magical winter furnishings.

The community is compassionately, even humorously, portrayed. Jewish characteristics are ticked off almost like a checklist—chess, violin, Talmud. Although it may be hard to imagine an intellectual who actually says, "I haven't read a book in months," it is wry to hear the man say it. A wedding in the open air, traditional except that a light snow accompanies the rabbi, seems by the time it occurs quite in order for this accommodated group.

Zwick's two principal actors would have had a harder time if the characters had been the original Bielskis. But Zus, as given here, is well within the grasp of Liev Schreiber, who has ample volatility on tap as well as vulnerability. Tuvia is Daniel Craig, who proved himself an authenticating actor long before he encountered James Bond. He has depths that he likes to keep secret, which is oddly appealing in an actor. Here he could have used one gram more of command, but he never falters. His performance has comprehension and confidence.

So, at the last, *Defiance* stands strong because its cinematically difficult center is strong. It is hardly news that good subjects do not necessarily make good films; but good subjects, feelingly handled, can certainly concentrate a maneuvering film. When we finally see the long file of Jews making their way out of the forest across an open field toward freedom—an open field after many months of concealment—and we remember what they have endured, we are suffused with a sense of triumph. The trappings of the framework are well outweighed by this moment of exultation. Not often can we leave a film quite aware of its shortcomings yet grateful that it exists.

Cities evoke films. It's not just that cities have lent atmosphere and zest to innumerable fiction films: documentaries about cities flourish. Poets and authors and painters have long dealt with cities as subjects, and when it came along, film joined in. New York, London, Berlin, Paris, Rome, Moscow are only some of the world capitals that have been celebrated on the screen—not only in plodding travelogues but in perceptive films. The view can be large (Guttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* in 1927) or it can focus on one aspect (Antonioni's *Nettezza Urbana* in 1948—a short about the Sanitation Department in Rome.)

And the city need not be a fabled world capital. Guy Maddin proved that again recently with *My Winnipeg*. Terence Davies does it yet again with *Of Time and the City*, which is about Liverpool. It is his native city, and he has treated it sensitively in some earlier autobiographical films. Here he simply wants to indite an ode to it—not to its beauties (even Davies can't find many), but to its verve, its rhythms, its history, its right to be on earth.

He himself does the narration, mellifluous in voice and laden with poetic quotations that sometimes seem more appropriate to his feelings than to what we are looking at. Also he brings in great swatches of huge music—symphonic with chorus—to imply, I suppose, that even in these gray streets complicated lives persist. He takes us to municipal halls, tugboats, commuter rushes, markets, jobs. He sketches some modern history from a royal procession through (of course) the Beatles to the present.

The marvel of it all is that it is interesting. Partly this is because Davies, a deft film-maker, cherishes every alley and conveys his affection despite the occasional grandeur of his voice-over. Partly it is because it is hard to fail with a film of this sort if it is adequately made. Documentaries about people going about their lives, no matter what they are doing, tend to hold us, especially if confined to short clips of shops and ferries and mothers with their babies. Such films afford a double pleasure. With specifics of place and custom, they enlighten; and, in Western cities, anyway, they assert universals. In a subtle, almost sinuous way, they confirm that those people in far-off cities, huffing and laughing and gabbing and just hurrying to work, are distant cousins. As others have done with other cities, Davies makes us all a bit Liverpudlian. ◆

## Sarah Williams Goldhagen on Architecture

# STICK STUCK

One of the items in "Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling," the exhibition recently at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was a short film, made in 1930, called "Houses While You Wait." A grainy black-and-white screen opens up with a view of a vacant suburban lot. A delivery truck rolls up, filled with wall-size metal panels and other materials. A retinue of somewhat scruffy white men in baggy pants unloads the cargo and deposits it on the site. They scurry around at that ridiculous, fast-forward silent-film speed. Three minutes later—the film reports that some hours have elapsed—presto! A small, comfy-looking, pitched roof home takes its place in the neighborhood. The film closes with one of the builders relaxing on his new front porch, enjoying a smoke.

It is not so silly, really. Henry Ford developed the automobile assembly line nearly a century ago, and now few people expect their cars to be custom built. Automobile manufacturers perpetually update their design prototypes to incorporate the latest technologies and to accommodate changing consumer habits and tastes. They buy rubber, steel, engine parts, enamel paint, and sound systems from various suppliers, and they assemble cars in plants with time-managed



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

efficiency, shipping the finished products to local distributors. There is no building every chassis by hand; no bringing in the engine builder for each engine, the electrician to install the wiring, the body builder for hoods and fenders, the HVAC technician for air conditioning and heat. Consumers "customize" their cars by selecting from a restricted range of choices on a limited range of features. Most elements in the typical automobile are standardized, making putting one together an insert-Flap-A-into-Slot-A affair.

Over ninety percent of the houses constructed in the United States are not designed by architects. Most observers would agree that, compared with the typical automobile, the typical developer site-built (also referred to, with uncanny aptness, as stick-built) house is remarkably retrograde in terms of its design and its construction process, during which a shocking amount of labor and material resources is unnecessarily expended. Compare the construction of the typical house with that of the typical car. Even stock house designs must be drawn and re-drawn to accord with highly variable local building and zoning codes. Foundations must be dug. Wooden frames are custom-built and hand-built. Roofers roof, plumbers run pipes, electricians thread wires and install fixtures, carpenters install doors and windows, contractors pack in fireproofing and insulation behind the sheetrock they tack up, painters paint, landscapers clean up, grade, pave and plant. Over many months, this parade of tradespeople through the typical stick-built house is coordinated, competently or otherwise, by the notorious figure known as the general contractor, who typically earns his fee as a percentage of the cost of construction.

Technologically, there is no reason why houses, like cars, cannot be mass-produced, and in other countries they are constructed that way. Prefabricated, mass-produced homes, like mass-produced cars, offer myriad advantages. Fewer resources, material and labor, are wasted. Weather does not dictate construction schedules. Higher and consistent quality is more easily and reliably achieved, because the product is fabricated in the controlled setting of a manufacturing plant, with all the attendant cost advantages. The Swedish residential building industry has long been dominated by prefabricated construction: nationally uniform building systems made possible an abundance of companies manufacturing high quality kit and modular homes and prefabricated housing components. By the 1980s, prefabrication was used in 85 percent of new residential construction. (Not surprisingly, Sweden-based Ikea offers its own prefabricated house.)

Even in the aggressively privatized United States, new houses commonly incorporate prefabricated components, from lumber precut into standard lengths and widths, to hardware, to factory-built windows and doors. And wholly prefabricated houses also exist. There are three types. The most fully prefabricated is the lowly mobile home. Higher up the chain of complexity, and allowing progressively greater levels of customization, are kit and modular homes. In a kit home, the client selects and purchases architectural plans and the associated building materials, and hires local labor to construct the building on site. Contemporary kit homes are sometimes called Flatpak homes, since their components come in flat packages which can be readily stacked onto flatbed trucks. At the highest end of the spectrum are modular homes, in which the client chooses from a pre-established set of three-dimensional volumes—the modules—and configures them in collaboration with the manufacturer or the architect into a suitable home. The modules are constructed in a manufacturing plant, then shipped to the site and "buttoned up" there.

In the United States, prefabrication comprises a very small percentage of new housing construction. If the construction and financial industries learn only one thing from the current crisis, it should be that American consumers desperately want and need affordable housing, and would flock toward better built, lower-cost alternatives to what the market currently offers. The technology to build prefabricated housing exists. At every level of the industry, from low to high end, cost savings would be enormous. Fewer resources would go to waste, which would be better for the environment. If one were to ask an economist specializing in residential housing to devise from scratch a system for designing, manufacturing, and distributing quality new housing, it is unlikely that anyone would ever concoct, much less advocate the adoption of, the current system.

So what is our problem? Several hulking obstacles block our path to a more rational system of house construction. Building codes, which are municipally controlled, vary enormously, and not just from state to state but also from town to neighboring town. Currently, this system makes it nearly impossible for builders to employ standardization on a large enough scale for manufacturers of prefab houses to recoup their initial investment in prototypes. Ditto zoning codes. Mortgage lenders tend to reward the familiar and look askance at the

## D Is Dying, as One Going in the Dark

A feeling of something indefinable but not right.
Not comfortable. A rushing.
Sometimes I have to stop
And sort out time at cyberspeed.

It's supposed to arrive "between 2 and 3 in the morning."
The very specificity of the promise makes me disbelieve.
If it ever arrives, I'll say, Good, that's over.
That little irritating suspense.

The hollowing wait. The stupid want
For good news. No bad. What more can one ask for?
One day more over in the prison
Of childhood. The runaway fantasies.

The retreat into the open mind,
That mysterious conceptual nothing.
Distant fireworks. Boomph, boomph, boomph.
Someone left the cake out in the rain. MacArthur Park.

A half-moon with a mottled veil over it.
The hum of childhood politeness.
"Do you remember me?"
He said, "Yes, church." I said, "That's right,"

And kissed his cheek. His gray beard felt so soft.
An engine keeps making the noise of an interior radio
Through which I hear a machine that keeps churning
Out: "For I seem dying,

as one going in the dark / To fight a giant—."
All the petty errors of life.
Let's take that wiring apart and see how it works.
Like that. As if it could be done.

**MARY JO BANG**



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

new. Labor unions, which dominate most of the trades in the construction industry, will likely do what they can to block a re-organization of their industry that ushers many of their members onto unemployment lines.

Given the typical chasm dividing a formal ideal and an actual practice, it should hardly come as a surprise that the allure of prefabricated dwellings has captured the imaginations of architects for well over a century, and continues to do so. Since the first Model T rolled off Ford's assembly line in 1914 (and some even before), the history of modern architecture in the United States has seen a steady output of proposals, manufactured prototypes, and occasional fistfuls of mass-produced prefabricated dwellings. These proposals vary in their approach to the market, and in how they contribute to discussions among architects about the future of architecture.

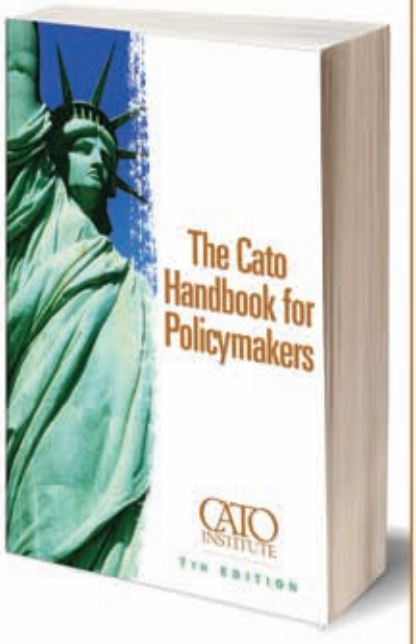
Regarding the market: at one end of the spectrum, there is low cost, high volume; at the other, higher cost, lower volume. There are architects, builders, and manufacturers who seek to manufacture mass-produced homes at high volume and low cost and create a genuine mass market. Most of these projects take no chances, and follow the well-established stylistic and typological conventions of stick-built developer housing. Such conventions were not conceived with contemporary living in mind, and although they may (or may not) have served consumer needs when they were initially designed, they typically do not serve home dwellers today nearly as well as they might, instead shoe-horning new ways of living into obsolete containers. On the higher-cost end of the prefabricated market, there are practitioners, mainly architects, who are less committed to marketing housing to large numbers of people and who explore prefabrication because they wish to deliver a better-designed, better-built product for the price, and sometimes also to manipulate new technologies, materials, and modes of design and construction to create new spatial or formal experiences. These projects tend to feature spatial planning and stylistic features better suited to contemporary (as opposed to anachronistic) living patterns.

Architects and builders take highly variable approaches to the architectural community in their ideas for prefabrication. Some proposals advocate a rigorous sense of social responsibility and present an at least theoretically achievable vision of better urban living. In this category, no exemplar stands taller than Moshe Safdie's Habitat, built in 1967 for Expo 67 in Montreal, which constructed a wholly liveable and genuinely attractive prototype of social housing that enabled urban dwellers to enjoy some of the advantages of living in a single family home, complete with a terrace-garden for every unit, while forfending urban sprawl. Other proposals demonstrate a genuine commitment to low-cost housing, such as Estudio Teddy Cruz's Maquiladora project for Tijuana, an infrastructural scaffolding onto which destitute residents can assemble salvaged building materials to construct their own low-cost dwellings. There is also another category of projects by architects who do not pretend seriously to engage the challenges of prefabrication. These projects, of which the most famous in the history of modern architecture is surely David Greene of Archigram's portable, pneumatic, space-capsule-like "Living Pod," can be amusing. They tend to be about the relationship of architecture to technology, and about prefabrication—essentially, they use design as social commentary.

After some years when interest in prefabrication has been dormant, architects, builders, and homeowners are once again exploring its possibilities. As of 2006, approximately 120 companies in the United States offered modular homes. *Dwell*, a shelter magazine, started up in 2000, and has built a circulation of over 350,000 by marketing what is commonly called mid-century modernism, especially newly designed, prefabricated versions of it, to "affluent, well-educated consumers." In a sign that the rising interest in prefabrication may have legs among professional architects, two well-received exhibitions have explored the topic in depth: "Some Assembly Required: Contemporary Prefabricated Houses," organized by Andrew Blauvelt of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, traveled to five cities in North America in 2006-2007; the other, organized by Barry Bergdoll and Peter Christiansen of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was entitled "Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling."

The MoMA exhibition excelled in bringing to fascinating life the history of prefabrication from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, presenting extensive research that uncovered a spectacular array of period advertisements, patent drawings, models, built mockups, promotional and documentary films, catalogues for kit homes (by the time Sears, Roebuck stopped offering its mail-order "Modern Homes" in 1940,

"A soup-to-nuts agenda to reduce spending, kill programs, terminate whole agencies, and dramatically restrict the power of the federal government."
—WASHINGTON POST




*The Cato Handbook for Policymakers* offers policy recommendations from Cato Institute experts on every major policy issue. Providing both in-depth analysis and concrete recommendations, the *Handbook* is an invaluable resource for policymakers and anyone else interested in securing liberty through limited government. This year's edition offers policymakers at state and federal levels with insights on a broad scope of issues, including health care, foreign policy, education, taxes, and energy policy.

PAPERBACK: $24.95 • E-BOOK: $14.00

CATO INSTITUTE

Buy your copy at bookstores nationwide, call 800-767-1241, or visit Cato.org.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

over 70,000 had been sold), and photographs of prefabricated homes, including a virtually unknown copper house by Walter Gropius that still stands in Haifa. The exhibition also presents well-known proposals for prefabricated houses by Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Marcel Breuer, some of modernism's most famous practitioners, and lesser known ones such as the Crystal House by the Chicago-based George Frederick Keck, and the Meudon, Tropical, and Portico houses by the French architect-engineer Jean Prouvé. Most spectacularly, "Home Delivery" displayed a fully reconstructed, factory-built, enameled steel, ranch-style Lustron House, complete with built-in bookshelves and kitchen cabinets. Designed after World War II by Carl Strandlund for the Lustron Corporation in the hope of easing the housing crisis, the Lustron houses were manufactured in a former wartime airplane factory, but never captured the market, and only 2,500 were ever released.

MoMA's sprawling, action-packed history of prefabrication was long on visual stimulation, but it failed to differentiate between the many varied approaches that inventors and architects have taken to the marketplace, and between the different approaches architects have taken to the place of prefabrication in larger discussions about architecture. Genuine attempts to create mass-market housing by Sears and Lustron, middle-to-high-end prefabricated homes like those hawked in *Dwell*, and high-art cultural critiques such as David Greene's Living Pod and Wes Jones's reconfigured shipping container (a one-off, contemporary riff on the proverbial primitive hut) are all presented as equivalent musings on the problem of prefabrication. The Walker's "Some Assembly Required" was a smaller exhibition, more intellectually demanding of its viewers, and far more tightly focused on contemporary practice, showing in depth projects by eight firms that genuinely grapple with the demands of the marketplace in search of new forms of prefabrication for the middle-to-high end of today's housing market.

The premise of both "Home Delivery" and "Some Assembly Required" was that the current resurgence of interest in prefabrication is owed to recent developments in digital technology that, taken together, could potentially make the prefabricated dwelling commonplace in the United States. Among the most revolutionary of these digital technologies are Building Information Modeling (BIM, which is also sometimes called parametric design) and Computer-Numerically Controlled (CNC) milling, both of which facilitate mass customization. Parametric design allows architects to consider almost innumerable versions of a design in detail, rapidly performing the calculations for each one and making the necessary accommodations for the behavior of specified materials. One of the most important advantages of these technologies is that they enable architects to bypass the conventional byzantine process in which the architect prepares drawings and hands them over to a contractor to interpret. BIM produces detailed drawings that themselves become the template for fabrication, and CNC milling has greatly facilitated the fabrication of prototypes and aspects of construction. These and other new technologies make it possible to customize mass-produced products, including homes, to individual clients' needs and wishes in previously unimaginable ways.

Contemporary prefabricated housing projects, technological breakthroughs notwithstanding, follow the same patterns as their historic predecessors vis-á-vis engagement with the marketplace and their approach to a jury of architectural peers. Most of the manufacturers currently offering modular homes target developers, and reproduce the inefficiencies and thoughtless design solutions of the typical stick-built developer home. "Some Assembly Required" and "Home Delivery" by and large ignore these projects, aspiring to demonstrate to the consumer the ready availability of better products at comparable or almost comparable prices. Regarding the professional audience of peers, there is, again, similar variability. Some projects ignore architects and simply serve marketplace demands, others address large-scale social issues and problems, still others push one or several new technologies or materials to some kind of prototypical limit, and some are not seriously intended for mass production. If "Some Assembly Required" relied on conventional architecture exhibition techniques—drawings, photographs, models, construction videos, prefabricated components, and wall text—to focus on actually existing mass-produced homes, "Home Delivery," in its section on contemporary practice, orchestrated the grand gesture: five fully constructed commissioned pavilions, exhibited in the lot next to the museum, which were directed less to the actually existing marketplace and more to provoke discussions among architects and designers about the future of architecture.

MoMA's approach led to some inspired projects—notably Kieran/Timberlake's Cellophane House and Lawrence Sass's Instant House—but also to one outrageously irrelevant proposal. Horden Cherry Lee and Haack + Höpfner's offensively precious micro-compact house is a beautifully detailed, slickly modern 76-square-foot cube, which, through creative spatial engineering, packs in two double beds, a sitting area, a dining space, a bathroom and kitchen, and—suppress that smile—*two* flat-screen televisions. Richard Horden, a British architect, and his colleagues have been working on the micro-compact house for many years, and the version displayed at MoMA had a projected per square foot cost of $800, provoking a friend of mine to dub the MCH a $65,000 coffin. The architects' proposals for how the Micro Compact House might be used are nearly as galling as the project itself: a lodge for skiers, or a high-rise hotel in a dense city. The architects reassure us of the MCH's sustainability, maintaining that it could function off the grid. But it is awfully difficult to imagine anyone taking this project as anything other than an unwitting, self-parodying commentary on our society's wasteful use of resources and space.

Two projects use recent digital technologies to offer prototypes that appear to bear promise for mass production. Lawrence Sass, in response to the loss of housing stock in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, tried to develop high quality housing at affordable costs. He used CNC laser technology to pre-cut plywood sheets that could be shipped flat and put together on site in less than a week by unskilled labor using only rubber mallets. (The project exhibited at MoMA cost $300,000, but that includes the cost of developing the prototype. Sass estimates that the houses would cost approximately $200 per square foot.) Resolution: 4 Architecture used BIM to develop a species of mass customized, prefabricated house, which was featured in the Walker show. From five basic modular configurations (called, after their shape in plan, H, I, L, T, and Z), at least thirty-five different configurations can be arranged, and through the use of parametric design these configurations can be adapted to specific client demands in many ways, including in length, depth, and height.

The Sass and RES4 projects overcome one of the principal obstacles to the successful marketing of prefabrication, namely, the cookie-cutter effect.


LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In the past, prefabrication and mass production have been anathema to architects who believed it important to express, and to create, the particularity of a place. For his Instant House for New Orleans, Sass studied the ornate detail of typical New Orleans shotgun houses and devised mass production techniques to reproduce it; presumably he could do the same in other areas of the country, where different vernacular traditions obtain. RES4's project appears to be close to matchmaking prefabrication with mass customization, although a video of one project under construction suggests that in this specific model the architects may have sacrificed too many of the virtues of mass production in their efforts at customization.

Cellophane House, Kieran/Timberlake, 2008

COURTESY MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

One of the more surprising aspects of the problem of prefabricated housing is that mass production and environmental sustainability do not necessarily go together. Employing prefabrication and mass production to create housing at a lower unit cost typically entails abiding by current market standards. In today's American residential building industry, reducing carbon footprints or minimizing resource waste are not priorities. Most newly constructed houses do not abide by even the most basic environmentally responsible practices by using (to offer a scattered handful of low-cost examples) permeable paving, cellulose insulation, low-flush toilets and passive solar energy. The number of environmentally toxic products in the typical developer-built new house is astonishing: cement (foundations) and drywall (everywhere) are two of the three top producers of greenhouse gases in building materials. Then there is all that PVC piping, particleboard, paints, carpets, and other products containing volatile organic compounds.

Two projects have taken up the challenge of marrying prefabrication to environmental responsibility: the transparent four-story Cellophane House by Kieran/Timberlake, which was the star of MoMA's "Home Delivery," and the lovely Sunset Breezehouse by Michelle Kaufmann, which was originally designed for *Sunset* magazine and was featured in "Some Assembly Required." Kieran/Timberlake, a firm in Philadelphia, has made environmental awareness the centerpiece of its practice, and its Cellophane House is a four-story single-family home that can operate entirely off the grid. All the building's elements are off-the-shelf. A structural aluminum frame and the building's basic volumes are fabricated as modules off-site. By using connectors rather than on-site welds to connect the steel components, the architects ensured that the house can be easily dismantled and its elements reused. Water is heated by a solar collector on the roof. The Cellophane House celebrates transparency through its extensive use of plastics: its floors and staircases are made of polyethylene sheets in combination with aluminum grating, and its see-through exterior walls are made of polypropylene sheets embedded with photovoltaic cells, which channel energy to a battery inside the house. The degree to which these forms of plastic are environmentally friendly is debatable, but they, like many of the Cellophane House's other materials, are recyclable. Furthermore, since the Cellophane House was designed using BIM, Kieran/Timberlake maintains that "it is a veritable model of mass customization" that can be adapted to a range of site conditions, climates, orientations, slopes, urban or rural conditions, as well as the budget and the taste of clients.

Michelle Kaufmann's Sunset Breezehouse uses a different system. Some elements of the house are outsourced to specialized fabricators, and then all are shipped to a factory where modules containing interior and exterior sheathing, utility lines, interior partitions and stairs are built and shipped to the site in a near-finished state. The Sunset Breezehouse would not win awards for formal innovation (nor, for that matter, would either the Instant or Cellophane Houses), but it is a very functional and attractive house, with exterior and interior wood finishes, an airy, central living/dining space defined by large retractable glass walls, small exterior landscaped patios, and a butterfly roof that helps conceal glare from solar panels. Environmentally responsible decisions guide many features of the house. It is constructed primarily of renewable and non-toxic materials, and its design incorporates extensive cross-ventilation, energy-efficient appliances and mechanical systems. Kaufmann recently sponsored a study of the Sunset Breezehouse's energy efficiency, and found that, compared to the typical stick-built developer house, the Sunset Breezehouse consumes nearly 50 percent less energy and has a carbon footprint 25 percent its size.

What these exhibitions demonstrated is that there is no dearth of splendid ideas for prefabricated mass-produced housing. Were the best of these ideas adopted by the market—and in the right climate, more good ideas would be forthcoming—there is no doubt that the bulk of newly constructed houses would be less toxic to the environment, better built, and last longer with fewer repairs. They would more fully and attractively accommodate the ways people currently live.

Why do we continue to settle for residential litter in ever-more-degrading



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

landscapes? That is the question these exhibitions fail to address. But of course it is not an architectural question. In social policies, better ideas by savvier architects will change little. For quality affordable mass-produced housing to be built, we need to create different conditions for a mass market. A new legislative structure must clear away the obstacles presented by non-standard, municipally controlled building codes and create enforceable national standards for prefab-friendly, environmentally responsible manufacturing and construction practices. Incentives must be offered so that the entrenched and intransigent construction industry, which has made plenty of money on its poorly conceived, shoddily built, environmentally toxic houses, will re-configure itself. If the necessary legislation were passed and new market incentives put in place, and the designers and manufacturers of prefabricated homes made all the real innovations in quality and reduction of price that the automobile industry has made since the Model T, who would walk away from a better designed and better built home for less money? Given the current housing crisis, and the new administration's commitment to environmental responsibility and progressive social policies, it seems reasonable if not exactly realistic to hope that some of tomorrow's homebuyers might be offered the opportunity to purchase products that are worth their price. ◆

## Jed Perl on Art

# THE SPIRITUAL IN ART

I.

The wheel of fashion, which turned Marc Chagall and Georges Rouault into has-beens a few decades ago, is turning again. These two misunderstood moderns are being taken seriously. The rise of identity politics in the intellectual world has certainly played a part. If once upon a time Chagall was seen as too Jewish and Rouault as too Catholic, by now the very allegiances that were said to compromise their modernist credentials have a renewed fascination. What is so remarkable about the work that has been done on Chagall and Rouault recently is that it goes well beyond identity politics, revealing the ardent particularism that these great artists brought to modern art's dreams of universalism. The Rouault retrospective that was mounted at the McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College this fall was a revelation, reclaiming the artist's impastoed surfaces and bejeweled color and inky outlines in all their vigor and steadiness of purpose. And the past few years have been a golden age for Chagall studies, led by Benjamin Harshav's extraordinary investigations of the artist's art and life and world, which, perhaps for the first time, reveal Chagall's topsy-turvy universe in all its serrated, kaleidoscopic complexity. A new biography, by Jackie Wullschlager, is at best prosaic, but the show at the Jewish Museum, "Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater," is riveting, and New Yorkers have had the added attraction, at MOBIA, or the Museum of Biblical Art, of a small exhibition focusing on his encounters with the Old Testament.

***CHAGALL AND THE ARTISTS OF THE RUSSIAN JEWISH THEATER***
*Jewish Museum*

***MYSTIC MASQUE: SEMBLANCE AND REALITY IN GEORGES ROUAULT***
*McMullen Museum*

The last time Rouault and Chagall were widely admired in the United States was in the years after World War II. They both received a considerable amount of attention at the Museum of Modern Art, where Rouault had exhibitions in 1945 and 1953 and Chagall a retrospective in 1946 and a show of the *Jerusalem Windows* in 1961, before their installation at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. Both artists were still basking in the afterglow of their early avant-garde years. They were aging bohemian legends. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the all-purpose San Francisco hipster, managed to find a place for Chagall in "A Coney Island of the Mind": "Don't let that horse / eat that violin / cried Chagall's mother / But he / kept right on / painting."

There was also in those postwar years a resurgence of interest in religious experience among intellectuals, and this could not have left the curators at MoMA untouched, and perhaps drew them to Chagall and Rouault. In 1950, *Partisan Review* published a rich symposium on "Religion and the Intellectuals," with responses from a wide range of writers and thinkers. The question raised in the *Partisan Review* symposium that most immediately related to the work of Chagall and Rouault was whether it was possible to separate religious consciousness from religious beliefs, a development that the editors saw in the writing of Heidegger and Malraux. There was probably a sense that the art of Rouault and Chagall could offer healing lessons in a war-shattered and desolate world—that here was the solace and illumination of religious feeling, released from the structures and the strictures of organized religion.

Alfred H. Barr Jr., the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, had been involved in seeing to it that Chagall found safety in the United States during World War II. And the 1946 retrospective may have seemed a way finally to do justice to the artist, although during the preparations for the show, which was organized jointly by the Chicago Art Institute and MoMA, there were worries, at least from Chicago, about overstating the Jewishness of the artist's work. Benjamin Harshav—in his inexhaustibly fascinating *Marc Chagall and His Times: A Documentary Narrative*—includes a letter from Daniel Catton Rich, the Director of Fine Arts at the Chicago Art Institute, to Monroe Wheeler, at MoMA, in which he worries "about stressing the 'Russian-Jewish culture and mysticism.' All of us feel that there is a danger of arousing a certain anti-Semitic feeling towards Chagall's art." For this reason Rich was opposed to asking Meyer Schapiro to contribute to the catalogue. In the end, the show was organized by James Johnson Sweeney, for whom a knowledge of Jewish religious life involved some on-the-job training: he commented in a letter to Rich that "apparently the tallith and phylacteries are not peculiar to a rabbi."

James Thrall Soby, in his text for the Modern's Rouault catalogue in 1945, worried that the devotional qualities of Rouault's work, the Expressionist intensity of his Christs and clowns, could be denied its place in "the contemporary tradition," and too easily embraced for a "sudden psychological accord with the times." And Sweeney, in his Chagall catalogue, argued that in the work the artist did in New York in the early 1940s "there was a repetition of old conceptions, a lack of conviction." But whatever the challenges that these artists posed



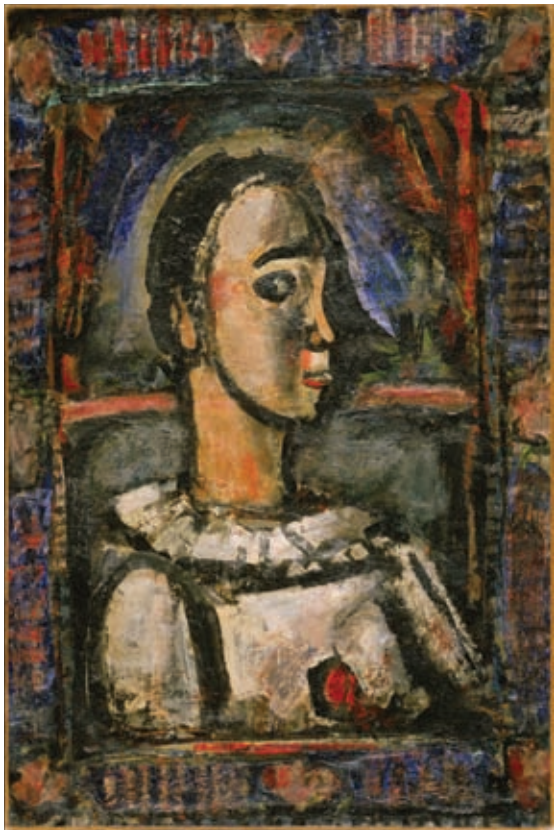
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for the curators at the Modern, the catalogues remain remarkable for their balance and discrimination. Sweeney, his limited knowledge of Judaism notwithstanding, had already shown a susceptibility to the mysterious resurgence of religious feeling amid the secularism of the avant-garde in 1934, in his book *Plastic Redirections in 20th Century Painting*, where he remarked that the sense of repose in Seurat's little painting of a woman putting on her makeup "gives it almost the dignity of a religious expression."

Chagall and Rouault, more than any other painters, raise the question of the modern artist's willingness, or ability, to absorb religious experience, or at least some personal experience that is deeply colored by religion. It is a question to which there is no single or simple answer. In Marianne Moore's contribution to the *Partisan Review* symposium, she speculated that "one could almost say that each striking literary work is some phase of the desire to resist or affirm 'religion.'" Perhaps the same can be said for works of art. Moore's observation is intentionally elliptical, beginning with the speculative "one could almost say" and closing by putting religion in quotation marks. With those quotation marks she is suggesting how vague and broad a word religion is. What do we mean by religion—a form of social observance? a private faith? a philosophy? a set of rules or laws? Religion is all these things to different people in different degrees at different times.

In wondering what religion meant to Chagall or to Rouault, we would do well to remember that artists have rarely had a simple relationship with religion, even in modern times. One of the most interesting art-historical essays I have read in recent years is Thomas Crow's "Chardin at the Edge of Belief," in a volume on eighteenth-century French painting published by the National Gallery. Crow makes a striking case for the persistence of religious feeling in early modern painting, arguing that the severities of Jansenist faith may inform the ascetic beauty and the powerful emotional undertow in some of Chardin's still lifes and even in his famous figure study, *Young Student Drawing*, where Crow discerns echoes and afterimages of the Crucifixion. A century and more after Chardin, the Postimpressionists had still not entirely shed religious feeling, certainly not if we consider the persistence of Christian subject matter in works by Van Gogh, Gauguin, and even Cézanne. As for Matisse, who saw the Postimpressionists as father figures: while describing himself as an agnostic, he spent some of his last years designing a Dominican chapel, a room for which he created stained glass windows, ceramic murals, a bronze crucifix, a carved door, and a set of vestments.

If the post-Enlightenment artist has pursued an unconventional relationship with religion, the even more complicating truth is that the more you look at the history of art, the more you can see that there is not, certainly among the great artists, anything like a standard religious view. Leonardo, who created sublime religious works, was by most accounts not an especially pious man. And Michelangelo, who was in his middle and later years a man of deep and fierce piety, can hardly be said to have produced anything like an official religious art, as he saturated even the tragic vision of the Last Judgment in a Hellenistic fascination with physicality that sits strangely with Catholic dogma. Even the artists of the Renaissance had their ways of resisting or affirming religion, to go back to Marianne Moore's equation.



Georges Rouault, *Pierrot with a Rose*, 1936

COURTESY ART RESOURCE, NY.

## II.

While the Rouault retrospective at the McMullen Museum of Art had an over-elaborate title—"Mystic Masque: Semblance and Reality in Georges Rouault: 1871-1958"—the exhibition itself was beautifully focused, with a concentrated force that convinced me, once and for all, that the avant-garde Rouault and the religious Rouault are one and the same man. Stephen Schloesser, who organized the exhibition and is a professor of history at Boston College, knows an enormous amount about twentieth-century Catholic culture in France; his recent book, *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris, 1919-1933*, was highly praised in these pages by Joseph Frank. The retrospective at the McMullen was the perfect size. There were two dozen major oil paintings, a generous selection of prints, some works on paper, some illustrated books, and a stained glass window. In Rouault's mature work the Expressionist conflagrations of his early painting give way to banked fires, to the ashen depths of the prints and the ember-bright color of portraits such as *The Last Romantic, Verlaine with the Virgin,* and *Sarah*.

Schloesser has no use for the notion that Rouault wanted to reshape modern artistic sensibilities to fit Catholic dogma. Rouault, in his view, does not flee modernity so much as he finds in Christianity a way to grapple with the crisis in representation that preoccupied so many early modern artists—the anxiety about appearances that Merleau-Ponty called "Cézanne's doubt." For some artists, abstraction was the solution—the discovery of an alternative reality, the true or pure reality of which Mondrian and Kandinsky spoke. For Rouault, Catholicism, and more generally certain threads in Christianity and in the New Testament, suggested a different avenue out of the crisis of representation that had been inaugurated by Cézanne and dominated the Fauvism and Cubism of Rouault's younger years. Christ, as Schloesser sees it, became for Rouault the guide to a reality beyond reality, the flesh and blood man who was anything but mere flesh and blood. Christ, Schloesser explains, is "the archetype of the one incorrectly (and unjustly) judged by outward semblance and not inward reality; the sudden recognition of whom both subverts



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and inverts common conventions and perceptions: 'Lord, it is you; I recognize you.'" And this doubling of meaning, the sense of a semblance that must be dissolved into a deeper reality, the simultaneity of the actual and the abstract, does indeed help to explain the uncanny power of Rouault's greatest clowns and poets and prostitutes.

Rouault was born on May 27, 1871, in the very midst of the Commune and the bombardment of Paris by French forces. Years later he would say that he had "retained (from the cellar in which I was born) in my eyes and in my mind the fleeting matter which good fire fixes and incrusts." The family was working class, and, as Schloesser puts it, "republican, laicist, and socialist." Rouault's father "was opposed to the strictness of Catholic schools and first enrolled his son in a Protestant school"—and later in a secular school. As an adolescent, the boy was apprenticed to a stained-glass maker. A grandfather collected prints in a very modest way, and through him Rouault came to know Daumier's works, those unsparing critiques of the French status quo; they would prove a lasting influence.

So far as Schloesser is concerned, it is Rouault's gritty urban childhood that shaped his artistic attitudes, setting the stage for his later representations of the self-righteous rich and the hardened poor. Schloesser's Rouault is every bit as much a student of the modernism of Manet as of the Catholicism of Léon Bloy or Jacques Maritain, with both of whom he had important ties. (Maritain and his wife, a convert from Judaism, were also good friends of Chagall's.) And however deeply Rouault may have immersed himself in the neo-medievalism of the fin-de-siècle, it was modernity that held him, first and last. Mary Louise Roberts suggests in the catalogue that Rouault was far too absorbed in the immediacy of the urban panorama to fit into any particular Catholic structure of thought. Writing of Rouault's paintings of prostitutes, Roberts observes that "this is not the 'sadness of fallen Nature,' as Maritain would have it, but the tears at the heart of spectacular Paris."

In the McMullen show, Rouault's concerns remain extraordinarily consistent over a very long life. (He was eighty-six when he died in 1958.) Certain characters and compositional configurations—the clown, the whore, the head seen in a profile view that is severe, almost Egyptian—are present from nearly the beginning all the way to the end. What happens in the course of Rouault's career is that the sense of form deepens, so that faces and figures that were at first stamped with memories of Daumier and Manet are eventually enriched by a gravitas that derives from the study of Rembrandt and Gothic sculpture and stained glass. Those pre-modern sources were of course available to Rouault from the very start: his great teacher had been Gustave Moreau, the painter of bejeweled Symbolist dreams, some of considerable quality, who provided a bridge between academic and avant-garde in turn-of-the-century Paris. But it would take Rouault decades to turn his quotidian characters into talismans, so that what began as figures snatched from life became heroic types, as familiar and inevitable as those in the Bible.

Going through the McMullen show, I began to realize that relatively few of the figures in the later paintings derive from New Testament sources. If this comes as a surprise, it is because Rouault knows how to give his clowns and poets and singers a New Testament weight. Even his greatest print cycle, *Miserere*, which includes extraordinary tragic images of Christ, is not so much a statement of religious orthodoxy as of personal faith. Many of the figures in *Miserere* have no particular theological significance. They are included because they resonate idiosyncratically with the artist, who believes that the suffering or the confusion of this particular man or woman has some relation to the life of Christ. There are plates in *Miserere*, such as a rendering of a desolate suburban thoroughfare entitled *The Solitary Street*, that convey a strong lyric chill. *The Solitary Street* brings Giacometti and Kafka to mind.

Rouault's art, in paint and in the prints to which he devoted so much of his energy, came through in this exhibition with a freshness and a liveliness I have never felt before, although I have always been sympathetic to Rouault. The plangent darks of his prints are a miracle. Working mostly in aquatint, a process of etching a copper plate to establish a range of gray tones, he discovered a sumptuously somber mood. Rouault took full advantage of the technical brilliance of the great twentieth-century French printers, working, as did Picasso, with wizards such as Roger Lacourière. *Cirque de l'Étoile filante*, a cycle of color aquatints from multiple plates that Rouault did with Lacourière in the 1930s, is one of the peaks of the printmaker's art, with color effects that are simultaneously plangent and acidic. By closely relating paintings and prints, Schloesser demonstrates the give and take between the two media, the way the impasto of the oil paint became, for Rouault, an analogy to the working of the metal plate. With Rouault, the elaborately encrusted oil paint surface is treated as a necessary artifice, one that yields glimpses of a reality that lies beyond.

It is no accident that among Rouault's selection of key moments in the life of Christ, the story of Veronica's veil figures so prominently. Rouault was fascinated by this fine piece of linen cloth which, after being used to wipe the face of the suffering Christ, turned out to be imprinted with his features. In Rouault's work this is a central motif, a primal Catholic story in which the suffering Christ becomes a two-dimensional image: a magical painting. For Rouault, indeed, Catholicism is essentially a series of powerful images. The oval face on Veronica's veil becomes the template for many of his faces. The stern, simple geometry of the image of Christ on the Cross is echoed in the insistent verticals and horizontals of many of his canvases. Is Rouault telling us that every form in nature bends toward the Savior's form? This is a Catholicism that has less to do with religious convictions than with formal values, which for an artist are, of course, foundational values.

## III.

Among the men who shaped the French avant-garde's complex relationship with religious art was the legendary dealer Ambroise Vollard. He provided support not only for Rouault's *Miserere*, but also for Chagall's first sustained exploration of Old Testament themes. This connection strikes me as highly significant. At one time or another Vollard owned much of the most important work by Cézanne, Degas, and Renoir; his portrait was painted by Cézanne, Renoir, Bonnard, and Picasso; and he gave Picasso some of his earliest exposure in Paris. He was very active as a publisher of illustrated books; and if religious subject matter attracted him in part for its commercial promise, I suspect that Vollard also recognized that such themes could incite the modern artistic imagination. The Bible was not Chagall's first collaboration with Vollard. Among their earlier projects was an edition of the fables of La Fontaine, which had provoked negative comment from some observers who felt that a Russian-Jewish artist was not the right man to illustrate a French classic. When that project was completed, Vollard suggested that Chagall illustrate the Bible.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

By the time Chagall began his Old Testament etchings in 1931, he was entering middle age. He was born in 1887 in the Russian Pale of Settlement, in Vitebsk, a city far larger and more prosperous than the little shtetls that he would include in his paintings when he wanted to suggest the place where his life had begun. His father was a workingman, little more than a beast of burden; his mother ran a store. The key that unlocked Chagall's future was actually right there in Vitebsk, where his mother took the boy who showed some talent for drawing to see Yury Pen, a painter who ran a school in Vitebsk and was well known for his naturalistic representations of Jewish life. By the time he died in 1985, Chagall had lived many different lives in many different places: a bohemian in Paris before World War I; an active participant in the artists' controversies of early Revolutionary Russia; a highly successful member of the School of Paris in the halcyon years between the wars; an exile from Hitler's Europe in America in the 1940s; and finally an international celebrity on the Côte d'Azur. Through it all he preserved some deep iron certainty, a tough pride that one feels not only in the Jewish bohemian, hardly more than a boy, who stares out from the earliest photographs, but also in the pragmatic old Jew who appears in the candid shots of the 1960s and l970s.

Marc Chagall, *The Prophet Jeremiah*, 1968

COURTESY ALFRED A. KNOPF

There is probably no twentieth-century artist about whom there is more truth in the old cliché about becoming a victim of one's own success. But even as he convinced the world that he was a man from whose brush and pen a lifetime of experience effortlessly flowed, Chagall was in truth a subtle modern thinker, a mythologist whose works can be as intricately plotted as a passage in *Finnegans Wake*. The trouble with Jackie Wullschlager's new biography of Chagall, published by Knopf, is that she is attempting to rescue the artist from a conventional reputation without ever really being able to see beyond that reputation. This is a dutiful, tiresome piece of work. The best studies of Chagall in recent years—and most of them have been done by Benjamin Harshav, a professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at Yale—have some of the adventurousness of the early research on Joyce. Harshav's analyses of key paintings make his *Marc Chagall and the Lost Jewish World* (Rizzoli) an essential book. And the best biography of Chagall currently available is not a biography at all, but Harshav's *Marc Chagall and His Times: A Documentary Narrative* (Stanford), which has some of the layered richness of a Talmudic text and some of the multifaceted, crazy-quilt quality of a collage by Kurt Schwitters.

Harshav believes that the key to Chagall's art is his intimate relationship with Yiddish, the language he grew up speaking and with which he was arguably most at ease throughout his life. His ties to Yiddish literature remained strong long after the world embraced him as a hero of the School of Paris. In Yiddish, or so Harshav explains, "you *can* speak several languages in the same sentence, and you can make forays into the mainland of the component languages of Yiddish: Russian, Hebrew, German, or Polish." The integrity of Yiddish grows out of the variety of the influences that it absorbs. Harshav believes that the same can be said of Chagall's painting, which, like the Yiddish language itself, makes "a complex, kaleidoscopic, and contrapuntal whole. We may describe this attitude as demonstrative eclecticism or, more positively, as a polyphony of forces of various origin working in one painting." Harshav shows how at various times Chagall thought of himself as a Russian artist, a French artist, a Jewish artist; it is the dissonances between these positions, constantly reconciled through a high level of imaginative play, that give his work its dynamism.

In this complex mix, Judaism as a religion, as distinct from Jewish culture, has its own now-you-see-it-now-you-don't part to play. If Judaism is the foundation from which Jewish culture grows, it is often in Chagall's work a half-buried foundation, with images of the synagogue, the Torah, and the Sabbath table given no more importance than the peddler or the lover or the flying cow. Chagall, whose grasp of Hebrew and knowledge of Jewish texts was at best weak, never put the life of the synagogue or the study hall at the center of his Jewish world. Vitebsk, when Chagall was growing up there, was a city where Jewish faith itself had many strands, and lived on intimate terms with liberalizing and secularizing creeds that were also somehow grounded in a Jewish yearning for learning and ethical truth.

It is hard to grasp the powerful cross-currents, both sacred and secular, that intermingled in the world where Chagall grew up and lived as a young man. Even the interest that Chagall took in Christian iconography has its origins in Yiddish thought, as Harshav explains. Thinking of the images of the crucified Christ that are an element in Chagall's work, Harshav observes that "the historical or legendary Jesus was part of the modern gallery of Jewish literature," and points to Uri-Tsvi Grinberg, "the Expressionist poet who wrote prophetic poetry in Yiddish and Hebrew" and "used the figure of Jesus prominently in his work." He even created "a Yiddish 'concrete' poem in the form of a cross."

Chagall would never have been able to embrace this richly layered world if



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he had not had a gift for pictorial storytelling. Whether in the knife-sharp, elaborately angled arabesques of his earlier drawings and prints, or in the softer, more dreamily meandering lines of his later works, he is a master of black-and-white media. And he finds ways to extend these graphic structures into the brilliantly symphonic paintings, which Harshav calls Chagall's "polyphonic fictional canvasses." Harshav thinks of Chagall as the first postmodernist, but in this he goes too far. Chagall's affinity for storytelling and woven-together pictorial and symbolic elements are part of the modern heartland whatever the orthodox theories of modernism may say to the contrary. Picasso, particularly in his graphic art, is a narrative artist every bit as powerful as Rembrandt, and an account of modern art that sidesteps Picasso's narrative genius is not an account of modern art worth considering. Modern art encompasses both Mondrian's Platonism and Rouault's Catholicism. And among the Russians it has room for both Chagall's polyphony and Malevich's purism, divergent ideals that in the early years of the Russian revolution did battle in, of all places, Chagall's hometown of Vitebsk, where Chagall was Commissar of Arts between 1918 and 1920, before being more or less run out of town by Malevich, who along with El Lissitzsky was teaching at the Vitebsk People's Art School and seemed to the students to offer the more attractive alternative. (The full story of that contretemps is told in a very fine book by Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebesk: The Life of Art*, published by Yale University Press.)

The last great Russian act in Chagall's life took place immediately after he left Vitebsk in 1920, when he became involved with the Moscow State Yiddish Theater, designing sets, costumes, and a series of murals that wrapped around the walls of the auditorium. These works, which form the core of "Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater" at the Jewish Museum, are making their third appearance in New York since they were first shown at the Guggenheim in SoHo in 1992, not long after being recovered and restored. These large-scale works, painted in a matter of weeks, are at once monumental and informal, especially the roughly twenty-five-foot-long *Introduction to the Jewish Theater*. This is an unfurling carnival of a painting, including portraits of everybody who was involved in the Yiddish theater plus a smattering of figures recalling Chagall's youth.

Chagall's pageant, with its whirling gaiety, suggests a Jewish *commedia dell'arte*, with powdery colors that recapitulate Tiepolo's cloud-wrapped fantasy worlds, but in the wake of Cubism. In the Yiddish Theater murals, Chagall embraces the Russian Jewish intellectual's vision of Jewish life. Raw experience is stylized, and given a comic spin. The life of the shtetl and the synagogue is distanced—turned into an aesthetic object. In one panel, an acrobat, hanging upside down, wears tefillin; in another panel a scribe, hard at work on a Torah scroll, turns out on closer inspection to be writing not sacred Hebrew but profane Yiddish. "The old Jewish world," Harshav observes, is stood "on its head, topsy-turvy, as in Sholem Aleichem's fiction."

Unlike the Guggenheim show, which focused on Chagall's work, the murals at the Jewish Museum are the centerpiece of an exhibition that is more generally concerned with the Yiddish Theater. The story continues long after Chagall had returned to the West, through the years when the Jewish Theater carried on under an increasingly hostile Soviet rule, until it was finally obliterated after World War II, with the savage murder of the great actor Solomon Mikhoels in 1947. The currents that flow together in this show are bewilderingly complex: this is an art that balances populist yearnings and rigorous modernist ideals, high art interpretations and popular Jewish experience. Chagall is said to have influenced not only the stagecraft of the theater but also its acting style. One of the most extraordinary moments in the show is provided by a brief clip of Mikhoels on stage, going through the comedic motions of a man as he attempts to drink a cup of hot tea: blowing on it, sipping from it, splattering the tea on his clothes, wiping off his clothes, and then taking a shot of vodka (I think). Mikhoel's acting here is at once utterly true and entirely hyperbolic, an Expressionism not irreconcilable with some sort of realism, and in this sense not unlike Chagall's art. This show, one of the best at the Jewish Museum in years, does a very good job of bringing theater, that most ephemeral of arts, back to life. Aside from Chagall, the strongest artist in the exhibition is the estimable Natan Altman, who was still bringing a graphic punch to costume designs and posters for the Yiddish Theater in the 1920s and survived the terror, dying in Leningrad in 1970.

One of the paradoxes of Chagall's relationship with Judaism is that it was long after leaving Russia, when he was solidly established as a master of the School of Paris, that he turned to the Bible in a serious and consistent way. In the etchings done for Vollard in the 1930s and later, and in the cycle of monumental paintings that are gathered together in the Musée National Message Biblique in Nice (created under the aegis of André Malraux when he was Minister of Culture), Chagall confronts the problem that European artists had grappled with for centuries, namely how to give the Bible stories an intimacy, an urgency, a visual power. When working on the Old Testament narratives, Chagall, because of his inadequate Hebrew, used a Yiddish translation, so that the stories may have become for him in some sense tales not of the Old Testament but of the old country. In the Biblical etchings there is a once-upon-a-time children's book quality, a storyteller's informality about the way situations unfold and characters emerge. There is something exceedingly *gemütlich* about these images. What is so remarkable about Chagall is that without ever entirely abandoning the secular Yiddish artist's eagerness to put religion in its place, he is willing to embrace the Torah as a primary text to be scrupulously explicated.

In these works you can feel Chagall imagining himself into the stories, thinking of them as a primal family (or community) romance, in much the way Rembrandt probably did. What Chagall's background gave him, beyond anything else, was a neighborly familiarity with the characters and the situations—an ability to think of Moses and Abraham and Sarah as members of his own extended family—ancient names heard in school and in the synagogue and at the Passover table, which were also the names of people he knew as a child. If the etchings have some of the intimacy of Rembrandt's little scenes, the large-scale Biblical paintings, done in the 1950s and 1960s, attempt to match the monumentality of the Renaissance frescoes. Chagall is no Michelangelo, but he does not look entirely ridiculous when he encourages us to make the comparison. The trouble for Chagall was that he had over the years created his own stock of iconographic and structural clichés—the shtetl memories, the Parisian amours, the swirling

ANTHONY RUSSO



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

arabesques, the overstuffed skies—and when he reached for an abiding simplicity in order to evoke the Sacrifice of Isaac or the Exodus, there were too many easy solutions that he needed to clear away. The results, while often equivocal, are by no means inconsiderable. At the end of his life Malraux was exercised about these works, and when it came to the visual arts Malraux was seldom mistaken. Like the religious works that Delacroix had done a century earlier, Chagall's Old Testament scenes re-imagine faith in the wake of Romanticism.

Nowadays the Musée National Message Biblique is regarded by most sophisticated travelers as a tourist trap, not worth the trouble. As for the *Jerusalem Windows* in Hadassah Hospital, they are often dismissed as kitsch. The irony is that what Chagall managed to realize in his public works for Israel, both the stained glass windows devoted to the Twelve Tribes in Hadassah Hospital and the tapestries and mosaics in the Knesset, is virtually unprecedented in twentieth-century art. Picasso, with *Guernica*, is the only other artist who even came close to creating a monumental work that shapes our understanding of a major historical event. And the reason that the *Jerusalem Windows* can be mistaken for a cliché is precisely because they have succeeded so astonishingly well in giving an inevitable visual form to Zionism's central hopes. These stained glass windows are among the most grievously underrated achievements of the past century, and certainly the only instance of a visual artist making an enduring contribution to a nation's identity. Harshav, who is in no doubt as to their value, emphasizes the break with Chagall's narrative inclinations that the essentially static iconography of the Twelve Tribes necessitated, and points out the challenges that the artist faced in dealing with a subject that was "rarely represented in the Christian tradition of Biblical iconography"—and thus required an entirely fresh iconographic solution.

Chagall created twelve allegorical panels, a splendid visual fanfare. He reframed many of his abiding images—the flying animals, the sun-and-moon splattered skies—in designs guided by a symmetry as agitated and dynamic as any Baroque altarpiece. Harshav has some interesting and rather complicated ideas about the way the differently colored windows are arranged in the chapel, seeing color rhythms that echo patterns in Biblical poetry. He is also right to relate Chagall's orgiastic blues and reds and yellows and greens to an early modern interest in the symbolic and transcendent powers of color. The *Jerusalem Windows* are a vision of the many becoming one, of the gathering of the Tribes. Who would have imagined that Chagall, having spent so much of his life expatiating on the joys of the Diaspora, would have seen that Old Testament experience could flow, almost seamlessly, into the secular consciousness of the young Israeli nation?

## IV.

The engagement with religious themes in Rouault and Chagall, sometimes dismissed as a holdover from nineteenth-century sentimentality, might more accurately be described as a rejection of the modern sentimentality that thinks we can so easily jettison everything that came before us. Although there can be no general rule about what draws artists to religious iconography, the significance of religious imagery in advanced art from the 1930s to the 1960s is not easy to overlook. In the 1930s, Picasso, a Spaniard infinitely more pagan than Catholic in outlook, did many studies of the Crucifixion; and in the late 1940s, Matisse was absorbed in the design of the Chapel at Vence, which includes the Stations of the Cross. In the United States, Barnett Newman titled paintings *Abraham* and *Chartres*, produced a series of paintings called the *Stations of the Cross*, and worked on a design for a synagogue. All around the world, there were major religious projects by the greatest architects—Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Alvar Aalto, and many others. Father Marie-Alain Couturier, a Dominican much involved with a revival of religious art in France, planned the church of Notre-Dame-de-Toute-Grace, at Assy, with contributions by Léger, Bonnard, Lipchitz, Chagall, and Matisse. And Father Couturier's ideas in turn had a deep influence on Dominique de Menil and the creation of the Rothko Chapel in Houston. It is rarely pointed out today that the major book in English about Father Couturier and the Church at Assy was published in 1961 by William Rubin, who had worked on the project as a doctoral student under Meyer Schapiro at Columbia, well before he became known as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art and an advocate of formalism and abstraction.

This history has been largely buried, or is rarely considered as a whole. Some aspects of mid-century religious art—such as the interest in involving major artists in a religious revival that might parallel the intellectual's response to Communism—tell us little about the inherent value of the work, or what significance it can have for us today. There is also no point in denying that a lot of religious work did indeed verge on kitsch, although Clement Greenberg was surely unfair when he wrote of Rouault's Museum of Modern Art retrospective in 1945 that the artist was an "up-to-date exponent of pornographic, sadomasochistic, avant-garde Catholicism." What seems essential, I think, is that the relationship between art and religion remains an unsettling topic.

Of course students of modern art have never entirely lost interest in Rouault and Chagall, certainly not in their early work. Even those who see avant-gardism as a revolutionary process that must reject earlier beliefs and modes of expression acknowledge the power of some of Rouault's first studies of prostitutes and clowns, done between 1905 and 1908, with their hell-bent, anarchic painterly freedom. And few would deny that Chagall, in the gleefully absurdist lyricism of *I and the Village* in 1912, was responding to the revelations of Cubism with a rare imaginative energy. The problem that many people have with Rouault and Chagall comes later, when they are seen as doubting their own imaginations, as looking for support, or what some would see as a crutch, in iconographic or theological or cultural systems that are anything but avant-garde.

Many would still argue that by the 1930s Rouault and Chagall were more or less on automatic pilot, succumbing to forces that they could not control, to realms of feeling that were fundamentally alien to the avant-garde. I wonder if the Rouault show that was mounted at the McMullen Museum could have happened anywhere but at a Jesuit college, although the Rouault revival, if there is such a thing, may be said to have begun in a commercial New York

**RESEARCH ASSOCIATE/PERSONAL ASSISTANT**

*New York City*—Highly intelligent, resourceful individuals with exceptional communication skills sought to undertake research projects and administrative tasks for one of Wall Street's most successful entrepreneurs. We welcome applications from writers, musicians, artists, or others who may be pursuing other professional goals in the balance of their time. $90-110k/yr to start (depending on qualifications). Resume to: gen8R@spsfind.com



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gallery, when Mitchell-Innes & Nash had a show in 2007. The catalogue of that show contained testimonials by a number of contemporary artists. And it is not especially surprising that the Jewish Museum, which for many good reasons wants to be seen as broad-minded and cosmopolitan, would just now be doing an exhibition about the Russian and Yiddish Chagall, rather than the Old Testament Chagall. The understandable desire to see modern art as non-sectarian may still leave some mainstream institutions reluctant to embrace religious art.

Considering that Rouault and Chagall and so many other avant-garde artists were born in the nineteenth century, when religion dominated European life to a degree we can hardly imagine today, it is not surprising that some of them were tempted to take another look at the old religious art. Yet more than nostalgia was at work. So much of the great art in the Western tradition, so much of the art that the moderns responded to wholeheartedly, was religious art—and this posed a problem for an increasingly secular age. The moderns wanted the old religious intensities without the old religious forms, or so most of them believed. Kandinsky, in 1912 in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, insisted on this shift in the most radical way, arguing that religion, far from being a spiritual realm, was merely a form of materialism, not much different from politics or economics. Religion, in Kandinsky's thinking, was a matter of externals, while the new art, the new spirituality, was a matter of perfect inwardness, a search for the essence of a man.

Matisse, who Kandinsky believed had taken some of the essential steps toward the new spirituality, observed in one of his later interviews that "all art worthy of the name is religious." This was in answer to the question, "Do you think … that there is such a thing as religious art?" Matisse, who never spoke glibly, was acknowledging that while art and religion now lived independent lives, they were nevertheless somehow related—that they were parallel directions in which the imagination might move. With Chagall and Rouault—and Matisse in the Vence Chapel and Bonnard in the altarpiece of Saint Francis of Sales in the Church of Assy—the relationship between art and religion becomes dynamic, dialectical. Even when they fail to make this relationship altogether convincing, they carry us to the crux of one of the enigmas of human history, namely how old feelings become new feelings. Are religious spirituality and secular spirituality so very different? That is the question that Rouault asked with such searching eloquence in *Miserere*, and that Chagall answered with shouts of joy in the *Jerusalem Windows*. ◆

## William Deresiewicz
# LAST EVENINGS ON EARTH

**2666**
By Roberto Bolaño
Translated by Natasha Wimmer
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 912 pp., $30)

Well, it's not dead yet. The modernist idea, which is really a Romantic idea, that the truest art comes from the margins, from the social depths, from revolt and disgust and dispossession, from endless cigarettes and a single worn overcoat, is still, in this age of MFA's and faculty appointments, when Pound's "make it new" long ago became Podhoretz's "making it"—is still, still, however improbably alive. A young man can still get up in a Mexico City bookstore and declare war on the literary establishment, give the finger to coffeehouses and Octavio Paz, plunge like a burning wreck into willed obscurity, toil in poverty for twenty years, and wind up forging, at the cost of youth and health and finally life, works that mark a time and point a new way forward.

This was Roberto Bolaño's story, and beyond his works' particular merits—which are indeed great, though not quite as great as generally claimed—their value is just this: the tremendous courage that they bespeak. The audacity of Bolaño's fiction, its disregard for convention and even probability, puts me in mind of a remark a friend once made after a jazz concert. I said I thought the keyboard player had really been taking chances, and he said, "No, he wasn't taking chances, he was doing whatever the fuck he wanted." In every sentence he wrote, every image he conceived, every compositional choice he made, Bolaño did whatever the fuck he wanted. In his art as in his life, he left a record of headlong daring that will become a rallying point for young writers for years to come. His myriad-minded fiction adumbrates no theory and swears allegiance to no school, embodying instead an unending search for new aesthetic and moral questions. At a time when the novel, at least in this country, has retreated into caution, he demonstrates again what is possible in fiction—which is to say, anything. His forms are sui generis, there is no emulating them, but his form-making is exemplary.

It is hard to believe that scarcely a dozen years have passed since the publication of Bolaño's first significant work, *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, scarcely ten since the novel that made his reputation, *The Savage Detectives*, and scarcely five since his books started appearing in English. His work came out in a rush, and it has come upon us in a torrent. Bolaño was born in Chile in 1953 but spent his formative years in Mexico, dropping out of school after his family arrived in 1968. He threw himself into the capital's demimonde, cultivated the style of an enfant terrible and *poète maudit* and read everything he could get his hands on—literally, since he supplied his bibliographic needs by shoplifting. His literary idols were the French Symbolists and the Latin American avant-garde (he disdained Neruda as much as Paz, and as much as he would later disdain García Márquez). His bookstore manifesto, "Leave It All Again," sought to launch the poetic movement that he called "infrarealism," which was designed to return poetry to poverty and risk, the streets and the road.

But Bolaño took his own principles too seriously to sustain the group for very long. He left it himself the following year, in 1977, to follow the well-trod path of literary exile to Europe. Years of vagabondage followed, mostly in and around Barcelona, but the birth of a son in 1990 convinced him that he needed to find a better way to make a living than odd jobs and poetry. Fiction-writing would not seem to have been the wisest choice, but it proved a fortunate one. Though Bolaño, like Thomas Hardy, never stopped regarding poetry as his true calling and the higher art, from then until his death in 2003 he produced at least thirteen volumes of fiction (posthumous publication continues). His models now were Borges and Cortázar, Melville and Mark Twain and James Ellroy and Joyce.

*William Deresiewicz is an essayist and critic who writes for a variety of publications.*



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

(His reading, which remained voracious, would have put a committee full of academics to shame.) He knew since 1992 about the liver disease that would ultimately kill him, and he committed himself to producing at least one book per year, racing for immortality under the shadow of death.

Bolaño's output includes novels, novellas, short-story collections, volumes of poetry (the first, *The Romantic Dogs*, is now available in English) and the unclassifiable *Nazi Literature*, a sort of Borgesian taxonomy. But above this broad range of work two great mountains loom, *The Savage Detectives* and *2666*. *The Savage Detectives*, at over six hundred pages, is a portrait of the artist on an epic scale and an act of self-mythologization to rival Joyce. It tells the stories of Arturo Belano, the author's alter ego, and Ulises Lima (whose name provides another point of Joycean contact), fictional avatar of Mario Santiago, the fellow infrarealist who accompanied Bolaño on his European escape before heading off on his own trail of wandering and return. But it tells their stories in a cunningly oblique way, through the depositions of some thirty-eight characters, spread across eight countries and twenty years, who collectively produce a picture not only of these two elusive "visceral realists" (as the movement gets renamed for fictional purposes), but of their whole sprawling milieu: Mexican dives, Parisian crash pads, Californian suburbs, Spanish squats; cafés, studios, newspapers and jails; hot sex and heartbreak, crackdowns and crack-ups; poetry, politics, madness and death; hookers and thugs, earth mothers and fatherly sages, social-climbing scribblers and slumming upper-class poets manqués; lawyers, generals, secretaries, professors and finally even the great Paz himself—everything and everyone that Bolaño encountered along his odyssey.

The variety of Bolaño's invention is exhilarating, the range of his sympathy immense. A master syntactician, he can conjure up a distinct, intimate, urgent voice in the space of a few lines:

> I'm the mother of Mexican poetry.
> I know all the poets and all the poets
> know me. I met Arturo Belano when
> he was sixteen years old and he was a
> shy boy who didn't know how to drink.
> I'm Uruguayan, from Montevideo,
> but one day I came to Mexico without
> knowing exactly why, or what for,
> or how, or when.

> Discipline and a kind of ingratiating charm, those are the keys to getting where you want to go. Discipline: writing every morning for at least six hours. Writing every morning and revising in the afternoons and reading like a fiend at night. Charm, or ingratiation: visiting writers at home or going up to them at book parties and telling them exactly what they want to hear. What they desperately want to hear.

> … Rafael and I were still living in Mexico and we went to see a Cuban poet, let's go see him, Rafael, I said, you are a man of the people and that faggot will have to recognize how talented you are whether he wants to or not, and Rafael said: but I'm a visceral realist, Barbarita, and I said don't be a dumb shit, your goddamn balls are visceral realist, will you face the fucking truth for once in your life, darling? so Rafael and I went to see the great lyric poet of the Revolution …

This last from a sentence that runs for a full page, from a monologue about a pair of characters only tangentially connected to the two principals. Bolaño's method is a kind of controlled sprawl. His larger narrative units are as brilliantly constructed as his sentences, each vignette as polished as a short story, every chapter precisely balanced, all of them adding up to a massive coherence. As the novel slowly completes its Homeric return, coming back around in time and space and theme, the emotional momentum becomes overwhelming. Like the great modernists, Bolaño is a classicist in disguise, giving form to the contemporary chaos by containing fragmentation within a larger harmony.

But with a postmodernist's distrust for the totalizing explanation, he also deliberately fractures his forms. Wrapped around the testimonies of the thirty-eight is the narrative of Juan García Madero, a teenage bohemian who tags along with Belano and Lima on an expedition to the Sonoran desert in northern Mexico. The trip's dual purpose is to protect a prostitute from her vengeful pimp and to track down Cesárea Tinajero, a long-lost avant-garde poet with whom the two visceral realists are obsessed. In Parts I and III, García Madero's story, Belano and Lima race immediately north ahead of their pursuers, the kid and the hooker in tow. In Part II, they occupy the same interval of time by spending the night in Mexico City with an old acquaintance of Tinajero's, and they are unaccompanied by anyone else. In I and III, García Madero becomes a friend of theirs. In II, no one has ever heard of him (or, except for a lunatic, of the whole journey north), and Bolaño pointedly begins the section's last chapter with the testimony of an academic expert who swears that he never existed. In II, Belano and Lima wind up in Africa or back in Mexico; in I and III, they wind up in oblivion. In other words, there is simply no way to reconcile the novel's two halves, as if Bolaño had passed his narrative through a prism, splitting it into two divergent trajectories.

Similar things happen at lower levels of structure. The witnesses in Part II observe Belano and Lima from every conceivable angle, but their accounts contradict one another. Belano, especially, looks like a different person to everyone who knows him. The method resembles Cubism; it is no accident that one section makes repeated reference to Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. The effect is to make the two characters seem at once more solid and more flimsy. As one of their acquaintances says, "it was as if they were there but at the same time they weren't there." At the level of the sentence, the novel's language is equally spongy with doubt. Characters are constantly revising their testimony, questioning their memories. Sentences run on past certainty into "or maybes" and "then agains." The tissues of the narrative disintegrate in our very hands. These characters are telling stories, and their stories, just like the ones in real life, are full of holes. Memories fail, motives are obscure, bias occludes the object of interest like an eclipsing moon. Stories are not answers, and lead only to more questions—which lead to more stories. We can play the detective, even savagely, as Belano and Lima do with Tinajero, but ultimately we are unknowable to one another. Finally, because all we have is our memories, and memories are just another set of stories, we are unknowable even to ourselves. Bolaño spends a whole book pursuing Belano with bloodhound and magnifying glass, hot on the trail of himself, but at both ends of the forking path, the trail goes cold.

Having written an epic of the self, Bolaño turned to something even more ambitious: an epic of the world. In the paradigmatic terms established by Joyce for the modernist literary career, he moved from *A Portrait of the Artist* to *Ulysses*. In the terms set out by Bolaño himself for fiction in the Americas, he went from *Huckleberry Finn* to *Moby-Dick*. The subject of *The*



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*Savage Detectives* was the journey: from youth to middle age, idealism to experience, urgency to banality, even, implicitly, from poetry to prose. The subject of *2666* would be nothing less than the nature of evil.

The question had been one of Bolaño's obsessions since at least as far back as *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, as the title of that volume suggests. Bolaño had arrived in Mexico City in 1968 shortly before the massacre of student demonstrators at the Autonomous University, an event memorialized in *Amulet*, the novella that followed *The Savage Detectives*. In 1973, he returned to Allende's Chile just in time to get caught, briefly, in the right-wing coup, and the complicity of artists and intellectuals with the Pinochet regime forms the subject of two of his finest short works, *Distant Star* and *By Night in Chile*. Central to Bolaño's historical identity was his sense of belonging to a generation blighted by the dirty wars of the 1970's and 1980s. *Amulet* ends with a vision of these "ghost-children" marching "into the abyss," "a whole generation of young Latin Americans led to sacrifice." *Last Evenings on Earth*, a short-story collection, speaks of "the violence that will not let us be. The lot of Latin Americans born in the fifties." Violence and the threat of violence are everywhere in Bolaño's work. His very similes tend toward violence, often for no apparent reason—"my hand hung limp, like a dead ballerina's"; "The sky, at sunset, looked like a carnivorous flower"—as if violence were his essential frame of reference, the root condition of his imaginative universe.

In the mid-1990s, events in Mexico, his beloved and adopted, abandoned and regretted home, began to provide Bolaño with the materials with which to raise the question of violence and the evil it embodies to the highest level of intensity. In about 1993, the city of Ciudad Juárez, across the border from El Paso, started to experience an almost inconceivable series of killings that continues to this day. By now, more than four hundred women have been murdered, most of them young, many of them raped, some of them tortured, nearly all of them dumped in garbage heaps or empty lots or out in the desert. Arrests have been made, but the real criminals have yet to be found, and it seems increasingly clear that the murderers have connections to and are being shielded by some combination of corrupt politicians and policemen and powerful narcotics traffickers and industrialists. (Juárez is a center of both the drug trade and maquiladora manufacture.) The victims, many of them teenagers, tend to be factory workers who have migrated north in search of employment: poor, rootless, vulnerable, without rights or protections, the weakest of the weak—a new lost Latin American generation.

It is around these events that Bolaño constructs his novel. Ciudad Juárez is renamed Santa Teresa and shifted west to his old imaginative haunt of Sonora. (The fictional city had been named in *The Savage Detectives* as one of the places through which the ghostly Tinajero has passed. Bolaño was already wrestling with *2666* when the earlier work was being drafted.) The novel's longest section takes us through the first five years of killings in an almost forensic fashion, 108 case reports that constitute both a steady drumbeat of depravity and a kind of epic enumeration, a fulfillment of art's most basic function, to bear witness:

> The next dead woman appeared in October, at the dump in the Arsenio Farrell industrial park. Her name was Marta Navales Gómez. She was twenty years old, five foot seven, and she had long brown hair. She had been missing from home for two days. She was dressed in a bathrobe and stockings that her parents didn't recognize as hers. She had been anally and vaginally raped several times. The cause of death was strangulation.

Threading these accounts together—Bolaño again demonstrating his mastery of narrative structure—is a whole set of through lines that work in mutual counterpoint, the stories of some dozen characters connected in one way or another to the crimes, mostly, because the perpetrators remain mysterious, as investigators: a rare conscientious detective, a clever young cop, a journalist, a seer, a Mexican Congresswoman, an FBI profiler, an enigmatic, terrifying and possibly insane German suspect who thinks he's discovered the secret of the crimes from his prison cell.

Again, events are being examined from all sides, themes refracted in every direction. The torrent of sexual violence is surrounded by episodes of love—the detective's mournful affair with an older woman, a rude prison romance—and endless instances of violence—*narco* shootouts, jailhouse beatings, church desecrations, and on and on. Throughout Bolaño's work, violence is often a twisted substitute for sex, the only way his isolated figures can connect with other people. One of the most disturbing things about the Juárez killings, as Bolaño's litany shows, is just how many of them are *not* the work of anonymous hands. A large minority fall into the category of routine domestic murder—women shot or stabbed by husbands or boyfriends out of jealousy or sheer hatred. In one scene, a cop regales his buddies with a long string of misogynistic jokes ("how is a woman like a squash ball?… the harder you hit her, the faster she comes back"). In gradually shading in the larger context of the crimes, Bolaño shows that they have been able to continue for so long, with so much official indifference, because of the utter cheapness with which female life is held in Juárez. Women there, as the novel's imagery of waste pipes and trash heaps continually suggests, are little more than garbage.

But Bolaño is not content to set the murders within their immediate socioeconomic framework. He also places them at the center of a much of vaster structure. The crimes are recounted in Part IV. Parts II and III takes up outside figures who come to find themselves connected to them: in II, a Chilean academic named Amalfitano who has washed up in Santa Teresa after a career in Spain; in III, an African-American journalist called Oscar Fate who has come down to the city to cover a prize-fight but ends up involved with Amalfitano's beautiful teenage daughter, who seems marked out for the next victim.

Around these three sections, as in *The Savage Detectives*, Bolaño wraps yet another story, this one also about the search for an elusive writer. In Part I, a quartet of European academics in pursuit of their scholarly obsession (and, romantically, of one another), a celebrated but elusive German novelist who goes by the pseudonym of Benno von Archimboldi. In Part V, Archimboldi himself, his life story from fairytale forest childhood to service in Hitler's army to decades of artistic reclusion. These stories, too, meander their way to Santa Teresa, as the academics catch rumors of their quarry's presence there, rumors that prove improbably true.

It is here that *2666* begins to betray its weaknesses. Each of its parts is brilliantly paced, and aside from the first few dozen pages of the third, consistently compelling. All are connected not only by the crimes, but also by a myriad of interwoven motifs. But the whole thing does not hold together. Bolaño goes too far this time in the centrifugal direction. The difficulty is not the novel's heterogeneity of form. Just



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

as *The Savage Detectives* offers a crowd of voices, *2666* gives us a virtuosic range of narrative modes: academic satire in I, minimalism in III, reportage in IV, the *bildungsroman* or fictional biography in V, allegory and surrealism in places throughout. There is no problem with Bolaño's implication that to know something one must speak about it in different ways. The problem is that there is no single central something about which the novel attempts to speak.

Where *The Savage Detectives* grew directly out of Bolaño's experience, he worked up *2666* at a distance. Bolaño never returned to Mexico after his initial departure, relying on a friendly journalist for information about the crimes, and while Archimboldi is an intriguing conception, he never becomes more than that. The novel finally lacks a unifying emotional impulse. Its five parts divide, without integrating, Bolaño's lifelong concerns. Parts II-IV are about evil, Parts I and V about art.

Instances of evil arise in the outer parts, but they point to a second weakness. Two of the academics assault a Pakistani cab driver for insulting a third. Archimboldi sees horrors during the war and hears about the Holocaust afterward. Colonialism and American slavery are mentioned elsewhere. But though the novel piles up examples of evil, it finally has little to say about it. The contrast with *Moby-Dick* is telling. By focusing on one confrontation with evil or between evils, the evil of Ahab's monomaniacal will and the cosmic injustice against which it stakes itself, Melville achieves an immeasurably profound understanding of that phenomenon in its psychological and metaphysical and even political dimensions. But while Bolaño shows us the socio-cultural conditions of murder in Santa Teresa and the psychology of violence among the academics and the banality of extermination in the Holocaust, his instances do not add up to a larger comprehension. Examples, no matter how numerous, do not explain themselves. The most common mistake in the history of epic literature is the reliance on profusion rather than concentration to create a sense of plenitude. The *Iliad* compresses its story of a ten-year war into the space of a few weeks.

To the extent that Bolaño does reach for a wider understanding of evil, he relies on a pair of abstractions that simply kick the problem down the road. The first is madness. The killings are frequently referred to as acts of insanity, but the idea only begins there. The German suspect is mad. Archimboldi's wife is mad. Amalfitano starts to seem like he is going mad. The detective's lover runs an insane asylum. The smart young cop is called Lalo Cura, a Spanish pun meaning lunacy (*la locura*). Parts I and II each contain an artist who has been confined to an insane asylum, and Archimboldi accidentally spends the night in yet another.

Madness, for Bolaño, is a figure for the inexplicable in human nature, the cavity in which evil and genius reside. It is thus a kind of blank, and forms a pair with his other metaphysical crutch, the name he gives to evil in the cosmic sense: "the abyss." This is a venerable trope in modern thought, typically employed with a great deal of self-pity and a great want of precision. Bolaño sometimes uses it to mean death or oblivion, and *2666* is pockmarked with pits and craters and mineshafts and ravines, images of the grave. But as is often the case, he also wants to make it stand for something more. For all his hardheadedness, Bolaño is not immune to the Ibero-American tendency towards spiritual bombast. Death is just death, but to speak of oblivion as an abyss is to give it a spurious glamour, while to talk of "the abyss"—the abyss that we are all dancing on the edge of, or tragically circling, or whatever—is to seek to recover the Christian Hell, in all its metaphysical significance, under a different name. The idea, like the thing itself, is empty.

Perhaps I am carrying modernist expectations to a postmodern work. I am looking for explanations, which Bolaño distrusts, and for a certain kind of explanation in particular: psychological analysis, the sifting of motives. For modernism—for Freud, most typically—people are dark but interpretable. For Bolaño—and in this he is exemplary of much of the serious literature of our time—they are not. We never do understand what impels Belano and Lima in all their extreme behavior. All we can know is what they do. All we can do is watch.

One of Bolaño's favored narrative strategies—ubiquitous in *Last Evenings on Earth*, predominant in Part III of *2666*—involves the telegraphic notation of action, without comment or interiority, in a minimalist style:

> Quincy Williams was thirty when his mother died. A neighbor called him at work.
>
> "Honey," she said, "Edna's dead."
>
> He asked when she'd died. He heard the woman sobbing at the other end of the line, and other voices, probably other women. He asked how. No one said anything and he hung up.

It is as if the narrative were numb, unable or unwilling to feel anything, a blunting of affect that registers the numbness of the characters themselves. *The Savage Detectives* is full of figures, the two principals above all, whom others call "zombies." In *2666*, the more common word is "ghosts." Not people who are dead, people who are alive and dead at the same time. People, like Belano and Lima, who are both there and not there. Walking corpses, deprived of volition and feeling.

Such figures, too, are exemplary. The postmodern self is typically represented as lacking affect as well as motive. The reasons for this are sometimes obscure, but in Bolaño they are perfectly lucid. They are political. The emotions his characters suppress are those that arise from a knowledge of the workings of power. This suppression, in turn, suppresses all. *Amulet* speaks of "an eye that tried so hard to forget one particular thing that it ended up forgetting everything else." In *By Night in Chile*, the suppression is self-exculpatory: the narrator wants to forget his complicity with the crimes of the state. In *2666*, it is self-protective. If you let yourself think about what is going on in Santa Teresa, you would have to try to do something about it. And if you tried to do something about it, as the novel reminds us again and again, you would be killed. Latin American authoritarianism—whether the juntas' in the 1980s or the *narcos'* today (both of them sponsored, let us not forget, by American cash)—turns some people into corpses, the rest into living corpses.

So while numbness is one mark of powerlessness, emasculation is another. *2666*, like *The Savage Detectives*, is also replete with characters whom others call "faggots"—not in the literal sense, but in the sense that they have surrendered their masculinity to fear. When Amalfitano starts to lose his mind, he is visited by a voice that taunts him to "be a man, not a queer," by which it seems to mean, protect his daughter. The Congresswoman, disgusted at the universal impotence of police, politicians, and journalists to stop the crimes, declares that "this is a macho country full of faggots. The history of Mexico wouldn't make sense otherwise." Of all the novel's gruesome moments, the most terrible is not one of the killings of women, but a scene in which the idea of emasculation by power becomes terrifyingly literal. One of the murdered teenagers turns out to be a rich girl who was



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stabbed to death by her lower-class boyfriend and his gang-mates, and when the killers get to prison, her father sees to it that they pay a horrifying, public price. (I don't know if Bolaño read Foucault, but much in his depiction of the operations of power accords with the French thinker's ideas.) Earlier in the novel, the director of the asylum had regaled the detective with a long catalogue of phobias, as if terror were a universal condition. The impulses in Bolaño tend to be the primal ones: desire, aggression and fear. But above all, fear.

The texture of Bolaño's prose registers the dynamics of self-suppression in a second form. He is there not only for the numbness, but also for the moment when it finally gives way. Among his many uses of the long sentence, the most important is to signal the breakdown of internal resistance—the recovery, if not of agency, then at least of feeling. Characters talk and talk until they finally start blurting out what they really want to say, confessions and curses tumbling out in a rush. Sentences shuffle along for a few clauses until they stumble upon their true subject, take a sharp turn, and shoot off for dozens of lines in an unexpected direction. (Barbarita, the character who reels off the uninhibited page-long sentence I quoted before from *The Savage Detectives*, is American. She doesn't have any resistance, because she doesn't have any fear.)

The larger movements of Bolaño's prose tell the same story. One of the most consistent and striking features of his writing is its mixture of a frank, gritty, ironic realism with baroque and enigmatic passages of hallucination, vision, allegory, and dream. Time and space crack and warp; probability pitches like a ship in a storm. The fabric of everyday reality, everyday sanity, suddenly tears, disclosing mad and terrifying truths that we—and one senses, even Bolaño—can only dimly glimpse. The normal gives way, if only for a moment, to the actual. As we go on from these passages, trying to return as we can to the plain sense of the story like a man who has stumbled past a corpse on his way to work, their memory lingers in the mind like a nightmare of obscure portent. They seem to come from another world. They certainly come from another genre. In their hermetic posture, florid and idiosyncratic imagery, and loose associative form, they are Symbolist poems in prose. Bolaño did not renounce his poetry, after all; he simply concealed it inside his novels. As he has Archimboldi announce, "all poetry, of any style, was contained or could be contained in fiction."

Finally, in their own looseness of form, extravagance of vision, and distrust of explicit articulation, Bolaño's novels themselves approximate Symbolist poems on a vast scale. A tension lies at the heart of his work. The figure of the detective remained for him the master metaphor of his enterprise. The writer was someone who could throw off fear, return to the scene of the crime and figure out the truth. Indeed, discovery happens much more frequently in his novels than we expect. Missing people are found, criminals are punished. Yet at the same time, often in the same act, the larger meanings slip through our hands. Bolaño gives us artists as detectives, but he also gives us artists as seers (including, in *2666*, an actual seer), otherworldly oracles whose promises of transcendental disclosure remain unfulfilled.

In one of his most daring and provocative conceits, the meaning of which itself remains obscure, he has someone explain to the young Archimboldi that the purpose of the great mass of mediocre writing is not to set off the masterpiece, but to camouflage it, to conceal it, as a forest conceals a cave. So much of Bolaño's writing is about reading, and readers, and readers who are themselves also writers chasing other, greater writers who seem to have vanished into thin air. Belano and Lima pursue Tinajero. The critics pursue Archimboldi. Both sets of detectives, when they are not searching for clues on the ground, debate interpretations of the master's texts. This, Bolaño tells us, is what reading is: an endless search for truths that will never be revealed.

And this, he also tells us, is what writing is. The seer is no more aware of the truths that he tries to utter than anyone else. Bolaño's fiction insistently gestures towards another realm or "planet" where artistic truth dwells—a utopian world of which literature is always dreaming. In yet another of his magnificent conceptions, he has Archimboldi re-imagine the myth of Sisyphus (whom he calls "the craftiest man in the world," as if to make him sound like that archetypal artist, Ulysses). Sisyphus's punishment, Archimboldi says, is just a way for the gods to keep him busy. "But at the least expected moment, Sisyphus will devise something and he'll come back to Earth," escaping from the realm of the dead with which Bolaño insistently identifies our world to return back home to the land of the truly alive.

It is this realm of true vision of which his novels are always dreaming when they fall into their trances of allegory and metaphor, madness and nightmare. Bolaño the detective is a superlative realist—meticulous, skeptical, unsentimental, with a hard-boiled ability to ferret out the secrets of character. Bolaño the seer is perpetually in search of something that will take him beyond realism. It is the quest that Spanish-language fiction has been on since Cervantes sent Don Quixote on his travels. Infrarealism, visceral realism, surrealism—anything, for Bolaño, but magical realism, which he saw as the exhausted mode of an earlier generation. "I'm sick of Mexicans who talk and act as if this is all *Pedro*

## Regress

On the day I graduated from saltines
to toast, and could manage
a few laps around the bedroom
with the two transparent tubes,
and needles stuck
into my arterial veins,
my mother showed up at the door
demanding I take my wig off so she could see
what I looked like now that my hair
had all fallen out, every eyelash curl,
every inch of peach fuzz, gone,
her face cocked
in the way that Parkinson's had set it
like a wind up toy missing a part,
her pants too short, and socks lewdly unmatched,
her turquoise eyes, sparkling,
as she gripped the banister, sturdying herself,
leaning on her avuncular cane,
so I yanked the wig off, and stood there
with my rolling IV,
as if this were some kind of accomplishment
and she did not flinch or shudder
the way she did at the sight of blood,
but instead, kept staggering towards me,
as if she wanted
to rock my bald head in her hands,
as if it had suddenly dawned on her:
"you are my beautiful baby."

**JUDITH HARRIS**



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*Páramo*," the Congresswoman complains. Juan Rulfo's novel, one of magical realism's foundational texts, concerns a man who returns to his parental birthplace to discover that it has become a village of ghosts. Bolaño's historical experience made it impossible for him pretend that the dead are still alive. The question, for him, was whether the living are.

The struggle of detective and seer was endless for Bolaño, and endlessly fertile. In one of the many self-reflective moments through which he sets out his artistic creed in this, his final statement, Archimboldi is praised for being "a person who didn't pretend to reconcile the irreconcilable." Perhaps the deepest source of Bolaño's greatness was the courage with which he pushed beyond his own conceptions, heaped questions upon answers, accepted failure as the price of discovery, followed the clues of his prodigious image-making power into the cavern of his genius. Nothing is more irreconcilable in him than his ideas about the artist. Archimboldi, who wore a Nazi uniform, comes to Santa Teresa as an avenger of wrong. Is the artist evil's lackey or scourge? The Mexican seer who has visions of the crimes also dispenses diet advice—a typical gesture, for Bolaño, of undercutting bathos. How can we tell if someone, even Archimboldi (whose works we know very little about, and whose publisher himself stops reading them), is a genius rather than a hack? There is much talk in *2666* of names and their perishability, and the novel's very last note concerns a writer who is remembered for having invented a kind of snack. Bolaño was always skeptical about literary glory. If true art is hidden, is the reward of greatness immortality or oblivion?

This is the very question that the novel's title raises. The date, which in a characteristic touch does not appear in the work, contains the numerical formula of evil, and its very size suggests the magnitude of the novel's length and ambition. But its most important significance lies in its science-fiction remoteness. The date seems talismanic for Bolaño, for he has referred to it several times before. In *Amulet*, the narrator thinks of "a cemetery in the year 2666, a forgotten cemetery." 2666 is the year by which we will not only all be dead, our very deaths will be dead. For all his references to "ghosts," he almost never uses the word in the typical literary sense, to describe figures who remain imaginatively present. People in his novels are rarely visited by their dead grandmothers or the spirits of ancient elders. His characters sometimes live a disturbingly long time, but once they are gone, they are gone. The women in Santa Teresa are murdered, and then they are forgotten. One of the novel's hidden surprises is that Part IV, the part about the crimes, predates the other four parts by several years; from the perspective of the rest of the book, some of its principal figures are already dead. Bolaño's work is often referred to as apocalyptic, but the very opposite is true. It is anti-apocalyptic. One of its highest messages is that the world goes on without us, and will keep going on, all the way to 2666 and beyond.

*Nazi Literature in the Americas*, the imaginary catalog of fascist writers, includes a number of figures whose lives extend into the 2010s and 2020s, as if the book were written from somewhere in the future. In *Amulet*, the narrator has a vision of literary posterity: "For Marcel Proust, a desperate and prolonged period of oblivion shall begin in the year 2033"; "Franz Kafka shall once again be read underground throughout Latin America in the year 2101"; and so forth. The effect is a kind of reverse belatedness. The lapse of twenty years between Bolaño's youthful experiences and the start of his novelistic career can make his works themselves feel belated, as if his stories of authoritarians and bohemians in the 1970s were already beside the point. The impression, however, is deliberate. Belatedness was one of Bolaño's subjects from the beginning. Not for nothing did he title his founding manifesto "Leave It All *Again*." The reference is to a poem by André Breton, just as the term "visceral realists" is said to revive the name of an older, forgotten group. By the end of *The Savage Detectives*, Belano and Lima and the rest of the new visceral realists have themselves already passed into oblivion. Nothing is new, everything gets old, names fade, immortality turns to dust. We are dwarfed by both the past and future, belated by the one, forgotten by the other.

There is a homology here with the Latin American predicament as Bolaño imagines it. Latin America, not Chile or Mexico, was the name he gave his homeland, and in *2666* he sought to write its story. The novel is not a global epic, as its inclusion of European and North American characters and scenes has led some to claim, but the epic of a particular geopolitical configuration. For the essence of the Latin American story is precisely the region's provincialism, its subordination to outside powers: to Europe, historically and in terms of high culture, and to the United States, economically and in terms of popular culture. So Part I gives us Europeans who come to Mexico for cultural reasons, and Part III gives us an American who comes there on business. The presence of these outsiders is not supplemental to the contemporary Latin American story, it *is* the contemporary Latin America story. "How paltry we are," the Congresswoman says, "and how spectacularly we contort ourselves before our own eyes and the eyes of others." Santa Teresa, Bolaño's center of imaginative gravity, is situated at the region's very verge, the nexus of Latin America and El Norte, and everything that happens there—the narcos, the maquiladoras, the killings—depends on that fact. The place is a kind of knot where European, North American, and Latin American histories converge, the magnet towards which every story, willy-nilly, is drawn. Just as the present in Bolaño is colonized by both past and future, so is Latin America defined and dwarfed by alien powers. Evident in this conception are Bolaño's left-wing commitments (which were emotional rather than ideological, for he had seen tyranny arrive from both ends of the spectrum), but so, too, is his self-tormenting fascination with the provincial condition.

To the despotisms of time and force Bolaño opposes a utopian hope—not political, but artistic. *The Savage Detectives* also alludes to the black-magical date of 2666. An old friend of Tinajero's tells the visceral realists that one day the poet spoke to her "of times to come," and the friend "asked her what times she meant and when they would be. And Cesárea named a date, sometime around the year 2600. Two thousand six hundred and something." In a second occult connection between the works, Bolaño intimates that Lalo Cura, the "crazy" young cop who seems to be the only figure with the patience and cunning to someday solve crimes, is the offspring of none other than Belano and Lima (both of them, somehow, at the same time) during their passage through Sonora at the end of the earlier novel. Lalo's mother meets two students from Mexico City who are wandering lost in the desert. "They looked as if they were high on something and they talked a lot.... They talked, for example, about a new revolution, an invisible revolution that was already brewing but wouldn't hit the streets for at least fifty years. Or five hundred. Or five thousand." Art is the only human thing with the power to rival history. It works its way into the womb of time, siring heroes at an immense distance. Bolaño is dead, but his dark, complex work is only just beginning its epic journey. ◆



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# Helen Vendler
# A NEW HEAD

**TYRANNOSAURUS REX VERSUS THE CORDUROY KID**
By Simon Armitage
(Knopf, 80 pp., $25)

The English poet Simon Armitage, born in the north of England in 1963, took degrees in two fields: geography—reflected in his ecological poems—and psychology—visible in his poems of ordinary life. He worked for six years as a Probation Officer, following in his father's footsteps, and then began to earn his living as a freelance writer. Armitage's poems, funny and savage, reveal unlovely aspects of modern life, but they also glitter with comedy. Reading him requires some acquaintance with contemporary English slang and habits, but his constantly surprising lines make a reader sit up and take notice. He has written a memoir (*All Points North*), plays, and radio plays (including one about September 11), and has done a notable translation, full of verve, of the medieval narrative poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. But it is as a new voice in lyric satire that he has made his most significant mark.

Armitage is not infrequently the subject of his own irony, as in the mordant self-portraiture of "Poem on His Birthday," from which the title of this volume is taken. At forty, he asks himself, which is he: "The Corduroy Kid" of his freewheeling youth, or the more menacing "Tyrannosaurus Rex" which he feels himself, under his corduroy jacket, slowly becoming:

> It's a case of Tyrannosaurus Rex versus
> The Corduroy Kid:
> the evolving peaks of his mountainous
> spine now noticeable
> through his favourite jacket, his fabric
> of choice.

This prose poem on its author's fortieth year could not be further from Dylan Thomas's lyrical "Poem on His Birthday": "It was my thirtieth year to heaven." In the brief forty sentences of his birthday poem, Armitage is the blackbird who has forty ways of looking at himself. He is a poet, but what does that mean: "Is he an undiscovered species living deep in the rain forests of Borneo, or is he extinct?" He is childishly unruly: "He is banned from the front seat of the car for taking huge bites out of the steering wheel." There exists some nameless irreparable past damage: "They pull a small boy out of the earthquake after three weeks, but what use is that to him?" Self-doubt and drink mingle: "A soluble aspirin uncoiling in a single malt." He seeks a job: "The Personnel Department—their collective smirk." He is victimized by the telephone: "They appreciate his custom, they thank him for continuing to hold." He turns paranoid: "He stands guard over the letterbox all night after the last fireworks display in his street." And yet this suspicious Everyman conceals within himself the same folkloric Dylanesque village longings as the rest of us: the absurd entry XL, the last, cries,

> Oh to be wassailed like the apple tree,
> his lowest branch
> dipped in a cider pail, companionable
> villagers kissing his
> roots, throwing hand-made tokens of
> good luck into his
> arms, singing and singing his name.

Armitage is a narrative poet in lyric dress, or a lyric poet in narrative dress. His poems are generally too long to be quoted entire, and a critical description of them, lacking the presence of their evolving narrative arc, loses the fullness of their pungent effect. They record pratfalls and failures, but they are equally given to sardonic resurrections. In this they resemble—as Armitage intimates in his post-Larkin poem entitled "Poetry"—the clock in Wells Cathedral, which displays on the quarter-hour figures of jousting knights and a frocked figure sounding a bell with his heel:

> In Wells Cathedral there's this ancient
> clock,
> three parts time machine, one part
> zodiac.
> Every fifteen minutes, knights on
> horseback
> circle and joust, and for six hundred
> years
>
> the same poor sucker riding
> counterways
> has copped it full in the face with a
> lance.
> To one side, some weird looking guy
> in a frock
> Back-heels a bell. Thus the quarter
> is struck.

Stranded survivor of the epoch of belief, the fantastically elaborated clock inhabits its deserted cathedral, and with watches so cheap, who needs a town clock? "Poetry" reflects on poetry's incurable optimism, its coming back for more:

> It's empty in here, mostly. There's no
> God
> to speak of—some bishops have said
> as much—
> and five quid buys a person a new watch.
> But even at night with the great doors
> locked
>
> chimes sing out, and the sap who was
> knocked dead
> comes cornering home wearing a new
> head.

It takes a moment to realize that in "Poetry" we have been reading a sonnet, one full of the tick-tock of time as the hard "c" (often in its intensive form of "ck") governs throughout: cathedral, clock, zodiac, horseback, sucker, counterways, copped, frock, back, struck, quid, locked, knocked, comes, cornering. This quick way with harsh alliteration (different from Heaney's rounder sounds) marks the perpetuation in Armitage of the northern alliterative line that echoes through *Sir Gawain*:

> Gawain grips the axe and heaves it up
> high—
> plants his left foot firmly on the floor
> in front—
> then swings it swiftly into the bare skin.
> The sharpness of the blow split the
> spinal cord.

The slang in the tale of the Wells clock is the sign of Armitage's ever-present colloquiality. Common speech, with its dialectical variants, is the music that he wants to hear. His funny epigraph to this volume is a folk rhyme fascinated by the sound of the lisp (and an "r" gone wrong); beginning in realism, with "Goliath of Gath," the piece goes hilariously over the edge into an intoxicated cadenza:

> Goliath of Gath, with hith helmet of
> bwath,
> Wath theated one morning upon the
> gween gwath,
> When up thlipped thlim David the
> thervant of Thaul,
> Who thaid I thall thmite thee, although
> I'm tho thmall.

One can see why this scherzo on the impossible "s" would appeal to Armitage's ribald sense of humor.


LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Play with language takes on a more serious cast in a group of five dialect poems all entitled "Sympathy." After a relation in standard English of some newspaper catastrophe, they shift into the Yorkshire dialect of one of the actors in the drama. The most successful of them, about the macabre retaliation undertaken by the twin brother of a murdered man, alludes to Matthew 5:38 ("an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth"—itself quoting Exodus 21) and exemplifies it only too literally:

> After the verdict, the murdered man's twin
> was suddenly there on the courthouse steps.
> He said nothing, just calmly unbuttoned
> his jacket and shirt, revealing a vest.
> In red, it read Matthew, 5:38.
> Then he re-buttoned his suit and he went.

The rest of the poem is spoken by the vengeful twin, who goes in search of the acquitted murderer, tracks him down to a scabrous slum, jimmies the window, goes up the stairs, and finds him:

> 'E's sat on 'is bed doin' X-Box with 'is thumbs.
> Looks up and sees me lollin' in t'door 'ole. Sees t'gun.
> I stands there a minute, clockin' 'im. You know t'sort:
>
> Metallica T-shirt, trainers, camouflage shorts. . .
> "What?" 'e's at it. "What?" Then, "Don't, man. Don't be a cunt."
> I lifts t'barrel level with 'is face, and I pulls.
> But it weren't lead shot what peppered 'is stupid 'ead—
> I'd emptied t'cartridge at 'ome, and loaded up
> with ashes instead. Me bruvver's. What they'd givved us
> to take 'ome in a brass urn. Then I turns and walks,
> leaves 'im with a powdered face and white frightened 'air
>
> like what those 'igh court judges wear.
> I got three year.

The murderer goes free; the brother who shot the ashes (eye for eye, and tooth for tooth) goes to jail.

The dramatic monologues of these "Sympathy" poems skirt the sentimental when they suggest a belief that "the people" are closer to the verities than the educated. They go too far when they are transcribing a fantasy of the grotesque (a man cooking and eating his birthday-present songbird). But still Armitage gets the dialect—almost unintelligible in parts to a foreign ear—down on the page, which is itself a literary accomplishment.

Armitage's poems want to wring the neck of the middle-class lyric of modulated feeling. Even his parable about a blocked writer being haunted by the spirit of sloth (reified into an actual sloth that has taken up residence in his attic room) has to bring in the exasperated wife's coarse wish to "stick a bomb up his arse." The sloth becomes a companionable presence who will not touch healthy trail mix but devours Toblerone bars. The writer describes his alter-ego sloth:

> Upside down, he hangs from the curtain pole
> like a shot beast carried home from the hunt,
>
> but light burns in his eyes; he isn't dead.
> A contemplative soul, much like I am,
> He's thinking things through, atom by atom,
> and hasn't touched the dried fruit and mixed nuts
>
> I left on a plate on the windowsill,
> although a mountain range of Toblerone
> is thus far unaccounted for. My wife,
> the three-times Olympian pentathlete,
>
> wants to trigger his brains with smelling salts,
> clip jump-leads on to the lobes of his ears,
> stick a bomb up his arse.

But the sloth-poet is not loafing; he is trying to adjust his nineteenth-century mind to the new physics, the new biology:

> But I'm not sure:
> to me the creature looks dazzled or dazed,
>
> like the big Bang threw him out of his bed,
> like evolution took him by surprise.
> Those eyes. . . He can stay another week,
> till the weather turns. But now back to work:
>
> look, a giant tortoise goes past in a blur.

The giant tortoise (edging in from the fable of the tortoise and the hare) is a total surprise—as Armitage's best endings often are. The assonance of "blur" with the preceding line's "turns" is characteristic. If end-rhyme is absent, an inner rhyme will lurk: we see "surprise" at the end of one line, "eyes" midway in the following one. The idea is to do this unobtrusively, so that it achieves its cohering effect whether anyone spots the rhyme or not: it is agility concealed in sloth.

Armitage burst on the literary scene in 1989 with *Zoom*, a volume that had energy and wryness but also pathos. In homage to Frank O'Hara (whose poetry is "open on the desk"), Armitage writes an O'Hara "I do this I do that" poem, in which an adolescent at loose ends phones around till he finds one friend available; and invited over by the friend for coffee, he strolls through the sunny morning and walks into his friend's house without ringing:

> and he still wasn't dressed or shaved when we
> topped up the coffee with his old man's Scotch
> (it was only half ten but what the hell)
> and took the newspapers into the porch.
>
> Talking Heads were on the radio. I
> was just about to mention the football
> when he said, 'Look, will you help me clean her
> wardrobe out?' I said 'Sure Jim, anything.'

The poem ends there, revealing the innocent callousness of the young: the speaker, his mind on rock groups and football, has entirely forgotten that his friend's mother has recently died. The friend's father cannot bear to go through his dead wife's clothes, and the task has fallen to the son, who, unequal to it himself, would do better with his friend at his side. Mute guilt ends the poem, the speaker suffused with self-reproach.

Poems such as this—understandable, familial, guilty—made Armitage a natural for school anthologies, and a set text for the National Curriculum in Britain. One of the more depressing aspects of such popularity is to see an ever-lively poet reduced to school fodder. In "My father thought it," from *Book of Matches*, published in 1993, the speaker recalls his rebellious youth, when he took to wearing an earring:

> My father thought it bloody queer,
> the day I rolled home with a ring of silver in my ear
> half hidden by a mop of hair. 'You've lost your head.



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

If that's how easily you're led
you should've had it through your nose
instead.'

And even then I hadn't had the nerve
to numb
the lobe with ice, then drive a needle
through the skin,
then wear a safety-pin. It took a
jeweller's gun
to pierce the flesh, and then a friend
to thread a sleeper in, and where it slept
the hole became a sore, became a
wound, and wept.

At twenty-nine, it comes as no surprise
to hear
my own voice breaking like a tear,
released like water,
cried from way back in the spiral of the
ear. If I were you,
I'd take it out and leave it out next year.

And here is the self-righteous schoolguide: "The subject may seem quite a trivial one, but it conceals a more deeply-felt struggle of the young for independence of the common sense and prudence of parents—often felt as negative criticism. How about replacing that with "the brutality and aggression of a parent—his contempt felt keenly by his son."

The guide's laborious questions on the poem attempt a specious "what do you think" stance: "Does the young man in the poem come across as a sympathetic rebel-without-a-cause character or does he seem weak and insecure? Or would you describe him in some other way?" The exclusive emphasis on moral "meaning" (aside from a stray bone thrown here to "frequent irregular rhymes") turns Armitage—no matter what the poem under discussion—into a didactic poet: "The poet is telling us to make our peace while we can"; "the love of the father (or the 'father figure') is something out of which the child never grows"; "The 'I' character sees how parents … let down their children, yet this does not mean that they love them the less." These disheartening platitudes suggest that poetry is taught in the United Kingdom as badly as it is here. In the hands of the pedagogue, Armitage's wit dwindles into invisibility, and his originality—of structure, of angle, of language—is ignored.

In the eighteen years between *Zoom* (1989) and *Tyrannosaurus* (2006, in England), volume after volume of lyrics came out: *Xanadu* (1992), *Kid* (1992), *Book of Matches* (1993), *The Dead Sea Poems* (1995), *Cloudcuckooland* (1997), and *The Universal Home Doctor* (2002), all containing vigorous writing. In a sequence from *Cloudcuckooland* called "The Whole of the Sky," Armitage reins in his love of list-making and instead writes short and harsh poems, many of them bearing the names of constellations. Although a glint of comedy or pathos pierces the gloom now and then, some of the poems, in their morose delectation in the horrible, show the damaging influence of Ted Hughes. In "The Ram," a neighbor asks Armitage to help him in wringing the neck of a ram mortally wounded by a car:

To help finish it off, he asked me to
stand
on its throat, as a friend might ask a
friend

to hold, with a finger, the twist of a knot.
Then he lifted its head, wheeled it about
by the ammonite, spirograph shells of
its horns
till its eyes, on stalks, looked back at its
bones.

And so it ends, without editorial comment, but the reader flinches as Armitage, in a very Hughes-like move, expends his best aesthetic effort on the last two murderous lines.

There is much less fancy-work in the constellation-poem "Andromeda," spoken by a Probation Officer. It alludes to the rescue of Andromeda by Perseus, who, bearing the Gorgon's head, immobilizes and kills the dragon who has abducted her. (Hopkins and Yeats both wrote poems on the myth: but whereas elsewhere Armitage, with his attraction to sound-crammed lines, is a lineal descendant of Hopkins, his Andromeda poem is one of sobriety.) The Probation Officer is case-hardened, but even he shudders at the worst sort of evil, which adds psychological torture to physical violation:

I've had dealings with some real hard
cases on the stairwells
and landings and wings of Her Majesty's
prisons, spied
through peepholes putting names to
faces, exchanged syllables
with bombers and bank-robbers,
person to person.

But once I got stuck in a cell with him
who bound and gagged the rich man's
daughter, left her
tied to a ledge in a pitch-black well
or a drain.

And nobody came. And nobody came.

That last line is risky—but how else to enact the prolonged waiting-unto-death of this un-rescued Andromeda?

A justifiable rage at society's treatment of the poor or the different occasionally endangers Armitage's work when it overmasters the poem, as it does in *Tyrannosaurus*'s "Republic," a Heaneyesque parable about a totalitarian state where only red cars are allowed into town on Monday and only white cars on Tuesday, and so on. (During the weekends, presumably to pacify the proletariat, cars of any color can enter.) Behind the rather comically arbitrary rules are the rich people who control the state. As they pass by in their sinister limos, they close and rule the poem:

And the money rolls by in dark limos.
Raybans flash from behind tinted
windows.
Bodywork gleams. The metallic black
shines to a depth where all colours
shine back.

This is too near to agitprop to qualify as poetry. Poetry needs a view more accurate and comprehensive than this—it needs to imagine itself inside the limo, behind the Raybans (inside the Edmunds, behind the Macbeths), and see how things feel from that perspective, too.

It is often a pleasure just to listen to, or look at, a page of Armitage, since his diction is so suffused, even in grim poems, with what Stevens called "the gaiety of language." Just as he played with sound in prefacing his own poems with "Goliath of Gath," so he plays with another property of language, mirror-writing, in the penultimate poem here, entitled "Learning by Rote." On the page, the baffling mirror-backwardness provokes impatience: of the poem's eighteen lines, only four are written forward, and three of those simply say "*Simon Armitage, Simon Armitage*." The fourth of these says "*Enough's enough. Now leave the boy alone*." The eerie effect of the wrong-looking letters is unnerving:

Dear Sir, in class I was the backwards boy
who wrote back-handedly. You made me sign
my name—but in reverse—ten thousand times
because the punishment must fit the crime.

Armitage drives his reader to locate a mirror, which exposes a schoolmaster's long-past dictatorial malice, still unforgotten, still capable of arousing rage:

ANTHONY RUSSO



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dear Sir, in class I was the backwards
boy
who wrote cack-handedly. You made
me sign
my name—but in reverse—ten
thousand times.
Because the punishment must fit
the crime.

Egatimra Nomis, Egatimra Nomis
at break time, after school, four
thousand, five,
Egatimra Nomis, Egatimra Nomis
eight thousand, nine, until my father's
note:

Enough's enough. Now leave the boy
alone.

Forgotten. Buried in the past. Except
this loose-leaf jotter came to light today,
crammed with some Latin-looking
motto, page
on page on page on page on page,
the words

Egatimra Nomis, Egatimra Nomis

and then the sudden, childish urge
to wave
this wad of mirror-writing in your
face.
And then again, and then again,
and then
again, again, again, again, again.

This ingenious picture of ritual educational humiliation would be a great choice for the National Curriculum, if its constructors want students to come alive to poetry. Not a chance.

There are poems in *Tyrannosaurus Rex* that repeat earlier achievements of the Armitage style: the lists, the tough Northern stance, the pathos of the poor and the abandoned. But there is also something new: the willingness not to make a point, the willingness not to be witty. The best poem here, I think, is not the arresting one on the King's Cross bombing "KX" (good of its kind though it is), but an altogether stranger evocation ("Horses, M62") of the breaking of a dozen horses into freeway traffic, bringing the cars to a confused halt. Its short lines are reminiscent of Plath, but it has a restraint that lightens the effect of the lineation. The sheer surreality of the event is enough for Armitage, as he tracks individual horses, then sees the flank of one horse pressing against the glass of his car, its matted hair seeming like worms glimpsed through an aquarium glass wall:

and here alongside
is a horse,
the writhing mat of its hide

pressed on the glass—
a tank of worms—
a flank

of actual horse . . .
It bolts,
all arse and tail

through a valley
of fleet saloons.

The horses clatter away, then, "spooked by a horn," they double back into traffic and go intently in their own direction, charging the cars:

a riderless charge,

a flack of horseshoe and hoof
into the idling cars,
now eyeball, nostril, tooth

under the sodium glow,
biblical, eastbound,
against the flow.

The horses cannot be tamed into joining the directed flow of traffic. We could draw an ecological moral—nature and machines are at permanent odds; but such is the wayward movement of the group of horses, and the wayward movement of Armitage's lines tracking them, that no such general rule can be plausibly deduced. The irruption of the horses—illustrating their farness, their closeness, their threat, their beauty—shows them to be, as Armitage says, "unbiddable." The scene is so unlikely that it becomes fascinating to the eye as animals and machines mix and unmix, converge and split, in wholly unpredictable ways. In the regulated order of the modern state, the unpredictable is the ultimate aesthetic desire. But none of this is said explicitly. This poem rides on its own melting, as Frost said a poem should. It nicely exemplifies the perceptual fineness of this talented poet, an aspect of his work as yet too little recognized.

The world will continue to praise Armitage, still only forty-five, as an imaginative poet of social protest and as a comic analyst of the present—a writer given to aphorism and point. But I value his good sense in not drawing a moral when a poem would be better without it. And I value also his surreal jokes. For those who want a few pages of them, consider "You're Beautiful," a riff on marriage, on the differences between a nice (if conventional) woman and a dubious man, and their avatars Venus and Mars:

You're Beautiful

because you're classically trained.
I'm ugly because I associate piano wire
with strangulation.

You're beautiful because you stop to
read the cards in
newsagents' windows about lost cats
and missing dogs.
I'm ugly because of what I did to that
jellyfish with a lolly
stick and a big stone. . . .

You're beautiful because you prefer
home-made soup to the packet stuff.
I'm ugly because once, at a dinner party,
I defended the aristocracy and wasn't
even drunk.

Or, again, continues the modern husband to his wife,

You're beautiful because you can't work
the remote control.
I'm ugly because of satellite television
and twenty-four-hour rolling news. . . .

You're beautiful because you cry at
weddings as well as funerals.
I'm ugly because I think of children as
another species from a different
world. . .

You're beautiful for sending a box of
shoes to the third world.
I'm ugly because I remember the
telephone numbers of ex-girlfriends
and the year Schubert was born.

There is a repeated chorus to this antiphonal chanting:

Ugly like he is,
Beautiful like hers,
Beautiful like Venus,
Ugly like his,
Beautiful like she is,
Ugly like Mars.

After its six appearances in the course of the poem, the chorus lingers in the mind, preposterous and revealing, asserting, like Yeats's Crazy Jane, that fair and foul are near of kin. If he can remain wary of his own distracting popularity, Armitage will continue to be, for many more years, observant and witty and jolting to the soul. ◆



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

## Washington Diarist

# Network Nation

On January 22, at 2:36 p.m., I received an email from President Barack Obama. "Friend," it began. "Thank you for being part of the most open inauguration in our nation's history." You're welcome. I do not recall any closed inaugurations, but never mind. This is the season of the benefit of the doubt. Like anybody who knows anything about the American past, I soared when the President stated his now archetypally American name; and like anybody who has tired of the haughtiness of conservatives, I relished the Chief Justice's fumble. (It was almost as if "Hussein" tripped him up.) But this presidential email makes me sour, for its content and its form. "As we begin the work of remaking America," the president wrote to me, "we must draw on the common hopes that brought us together this week." And: "I'm counting on you to keep the spirit of unity and service alive." And: "We face many challenges. But we face them as one nation." And: "Our journey is just beginning." And: "Thank you for all you do." It is all perfectly platitudinous, a Hallmark homily, but not in Obama's universe. Does the renovation of the civic sense really require such a return to literalness? I do not look to the White House for irony, but the extent to which the Obama bliss is premised upon such undisabused belief vexes me. Credulity is a poor foundation for conviction. I worry also that the Obama frame of mind sometimes slips its hope for reality into its assessment of reality: the challenge for reason is to understand that it is an island, that it is surrounded by its opposite and that therefore it may quickly reach the limit of what it can accomplish by its preferred method. If the recession and its outrages have shown anything, for example, it is that we are not one nation. Wall Street's interests are not Main Street's and Main Street's interests are not Wall Street's. (I understand that all the streets have an interest in prosperity, but there's that pastoral level of generality again.) Everything will not always go together, there will sometimes be war, and it is not divisive to say so. The correction of an injustice will favor the victims of the injustice over the perpetrators of the injustice. True believers in the free market will have to console themselves with the thought—to paraphrase Anatole France—that a rich man has as much of a right to health care as a poor man. And so I am heartened by the alacrity with which Obama has acted on a variety of partisan positions, and by his ability to conduct himself as if there is nothing partisan about them. He has a gift for making the part seem like the whole. His universal feeling about himself, the sincerity of his faith in his own globality, may serve us well, if it gives cover for the philosophical and political specificity of many of his reforms. It may also be a benevolent kind of megalomania.

One of the most momentous questions facing our society concerns the impact of the new technologies of communication on our conception of human relations. That we are all connected is plain, but what is the quality of our connection? The ideal of a "national conversation" seems to have been electronically fulfilled, but does a nation really converse? What do the social networking sites conceal about an individual and what do they reveal? (They certainly reveal a horror of concealment.) When a society is described as a network, what is gained and what is lost? The network is the controlling metaphor of our age, but the wisdom of John McClane keeps nagging at me: "It's not a system, it's a country." Some months ago I listened with amazement to a hotshot Israeli think-tanker explain that the medieval Jewish community was the first world wide web, and that therefore we could not understand it until the world wide web was invented. It was the dumbest thing I heard last year. I raise these doubts because of the email that I received from President Barack Obama. For one of his innovations in American politics has been the zealous adoption of the ideology of the network. To be sure, there were practical reasons: email and YouTube are cheaper than direct mail, and of course cooler—but direct mail is all they are. The number of people who can be reached in an instant is genuinely astounding—but this is a marketer's dream, nothing more. Btw, is not electronic communication the most facile and the most fleeting communication? Scholars have documented the inexorable effect of the Internet in creating "communities of interest," and the Obama machine wishes to portray the nation itself as a community of interest; but this returns us once again to that mythical unity. What is more likely happening is that Obama's community of interest is depicting itself as America's community of interest. Communities of interest are formations of exclusiveness enabled by technologies of inclusiveness. So it was odd to get that email from my president. I voted for him, and I gave him a few dollars, but I do not revolve in his vast magical orbit. The personal touch had a distinctly de-personalizing effect, the way Amazon does when it teaches me about my tastes. The Obama machine may be excited to be connected to me, but I am not excited to be connected to it. I am *not* connected to it. The jazziness of the means aside, this was junk mail.

Alas, there is also a cynical dimension to the texting of the people by the president. It is an attempt to evade the media and its apparatus of skepticism. Technology has made it possible for those in power to produce an unmediated and undisrupted transmission of their message. This is an epochal breakthrough in what Erwin Goffman called "impression management." No longer is an administration at the mercy of that marvelous inconvenience known as the White House Press Room. Nixon lived too soon! It does not matter that the message I receive over the heads of the access-passed company is congenial or even uplifting to me: a digital communiqué is still a communiqué. The appeal of the new information arrangements to the presidency is obvious. I imagine that the netroots establishment also welcomes the official echo chamber, but they are a herd of linking conformists who are about to discover the complications of life after Bush. Yet why should any president, even a president so popular that his face is on the fare card of the capital's subway system, not have to suffer the impudence of the press? That impudence is an institution of democracy. The greatest liberal of our time, I mean Barack Obama, is colluding in one of the worst sins against the liberal order in America, which is the slow death of the American newspaper.

*Leon Wieseltier*



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*You deserve a factual look at . . .*

# Israel's Defensive Response to Gaza

## Was Israel using "disproportionate force?"

Having absorbed over 10,000 rockets aimed at its towns and cities and having issued innumerable warnings, Israel finally decided to defend its citizens. It bombarded Gaza by air and by sea and ultimately invaded it. The "world community" is concerned and enraged about Israel's having used "disproportionate force" in its response. Is that a valid complaint?

### What are the facts?

**Some History:** In order to understand what is happening, some historical review is in order. Israel captured Judea/Samaria (the "West Bank") and the Gaza Strip in June 1967, in a defensive war against three Arab states. Since then, Israel signed peace treaties with Egypt and with Jordan. It has returned the vast Sinai to Egypt. Attempts at peace with Syria have been unsuccessful so far. Although there have been many attempts to make peace with the Palestinians, Israel's most immediate neighbors, that has until now proven to be elusive. There have been any number of "interim" agreements, but a final peace agreement covering all aspects and all demands has not yet been reached.

With the concurrence and support of the US and of Israel, the Palestinians installed a Palestinian Authority (PA) to represent and to govern them. In order to move the peace process forward, former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon decided to unilaterally disengage from Gaza. It was a very difficult and wrenching decision because 9,000 Israeli citizens who had been living there for generations had to be evacuated. Twenty-one communities had to be dismantled. Since then, there is absolutely no Israeli presence – civil or military – in Gaza.

In June 2007, Hamas wrested control over the Gaza Strip from the PA in bloody fighting. Hamas, classified as a terror organization by the United States and by most civilized nations, is openly dedicated to the destruction of Israel and for "carrying the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine." Immediately after seizing power, Hamas began to fire rockets into Israel. It is estimated that so far close to 10,000 rockets have been launched, 3,000 alone in 2008. Even one rocket would be considered an act of war by any country. Constant barrages of rockets on Israel by Hamas are obviously intolerable. If a neighboring country would fire rockets against our cities we would respond with massive force. And that is exactly what Israel is doing.

**Was Israel's Response Disproportionate?** Article 51 of the UN Charter is quite clear that any nation has the right to engage in self-defense against armed attack. The response has indeed to satisfy the principle of proportionality. But it is not correct to claim that Israel has violated that principle by killing more Hamas terrorists than the number of Israelis killed by Hamas rockets. There is no legal equivalence between the deliberate killing of civilians, which is what Hamas is doing by lobbing its rockets into Israeli cities without strategic significance, and the targeted killing of Hamas militants. The law is clear that any number of combatants can be killed to prevent the killing of even one innocent civilian.

> "Before [peace can be attained] terrorist Hamas must be totally eliminated."

In its air and ground operations against Gaza Israel went to unprecedented lengths to avoid killing civilians. In an area such as Gaza, one of the most densely populated areas in the world – and in view of Hamas's custom of locating its rocket launchers and other military installations in the middle of residential areas and even in mosques, using civilians as shields – that becomes particularly difficult. In what is certainly unique in the history of warfare, Israel, in its respect for human rights, dropped tens of thousands of leaflets over Gaza and placed telephone calls to warn residents of non-military installations to get out of the way of military action. The accusation that Israel is using "disproportionate force" is absurd.

**What were Israel's war aims?** The "world" most insistently demanded that an immediate cease fire be arranged. Remarkably, that same "world" did not utter a word or lift a finger when thousands of rockets fell on Israel. Israel cannot be expected to terminate its defensive action in Gaza until a comprehensive solution to the crisis can be reached. One can only surmise what Israel war aims were, but in all likelyhood, at the very minimum the following: • Full dismantling of all military power of Hamas, including destruction of stockpiles of rockets and other weapons. • Increased Egyptian supervision of the border crossings between Gaza and Egypt. • Return of kidnapped Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

Israel cannot possibly conclude a peace agreement with those who are sworn to destroy it and continue on that path. The PA, though still nursing impossible dreams of the division of Jerusalem and the "return" of the 1948 refugees, is amenable to diplomacy and can be dealt with. Final solutions have so far been unavailable, but there is indeed hope for ultimate success. The US government will wish to play a positive role in that. But before that, terrorist Hamas must be totally eliminated. That is the principle and the main goal of Israel's action against Gaza.

**This message has been published and paid for by**

FLAME

*Facts and Logic About the Middle East*
*P.O. Box 590359 n San Francisco, CA 94159*
*Gerardo Joffe, President*

FLAME is a tax-exempt, non-profit educational 501 (c)(3) organization. Its purpose is the research and publication of the facts regarding developments in the Middle East and exposing false propaganda that might harm the interests of the United States and its allies in that area of the world. Your tax-deductible contributions are welcome. They enable us to pursue these goals and to publish these messages in national newspapers and magazines. We have virtually no overhead. Almost all of our revenue pays for our educational work, for these clarifying messages, and for related direct mail.

114A

**To receive free FLAME updates, visit our website: www.factsandlogic.org**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# How can we squeeze more food from a RAINDROP?

Farming feeds the world, but it depends on vital natural resources. Just consider this: irrigation for agriculture consumes 2/3 of the world's fresh water.

Experts have concluded that agricultural output will need to double by 2050 to feed a growing world. We'll need to get more from each drop of irrigated water.

We'll also need to do more with the solution nature already provides: rain. The challenge for farmers is squeezing the most out of unpredictable rainfall. That requires putting the latest science-based tools in farmers' hands, including advanced hybrid and biotech seeds. Our goal is to develop seeds that significantly increase crop yields and can help farmers use 1/3 less water per unit produced.

Producing more. Conserving more. Improving farmers' lives. That's sustainable agriculture. And that's what Monsanto seeds are all about.

**Non-irrigated agriculture produces 60% of the world's food. It will need to do more.**

**Learn more of the story at ProduceMoreConserveMore.com**

MONSANTO imagine®

PRODUCING MORE | CONSERVING MORE | IMPROVING FARMERS' LIVES

© 2008 Monsanto Co. Monsanto Imagine and the Vine Design are trademarks of Monsanto Technology LLC.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED